

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

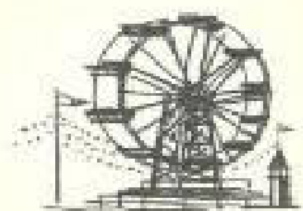
Mitch Albom

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Mitch Albom

Author of
Tuesdays with Morrie



the five people
you meet in heaven

The Five People You Meet in Heaven
Mitch Albom

ALSO BY MITCH ALBOM

Tuesdays with Morrie

Fab Five

Bo

Live Album

Live Album II

Live Album III

Live Album IV

The Five People You Meet in Heaven
Mitch Albom

NEW YORK

YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU

Copyright: 1913 (Renewed) Broadway Music Corp. Edwin H. Morris Co., Redwood Music Ltd. All rights or behalf of Broadway Music Corp. administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square, Nashville, TN 37203. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Copyright © 2003 Mitch Albom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address: Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, New York, New York 10023-6298.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Albom, Mitch.

The five people you meet in heaven / Mitch Albom.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-7868-6871-6 (alk. paper)

1. Accident victims—Fiction. 2. Amusement parks—Fiction. 3. Amusement rides—Fiction. 4. Future life—Fiction. 5. Aged men—Fiction. 6. Heaven—Fiction. 7. Death—Fiction. I. Title. PS3601.L335F59 2003 813'.6-de21

2003047888

Hyperion books are available for special promotions and premiums. For details contact Michael Rertas, Manager, Inventory and Premium Sales, Hyperion, 77 West 66th Street, 11th floor, New York, New York 10023-6298, or call 212-456-9133.

FIRST EDITION

Copyright © 2003 Mitch Albom

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

Mitch Albom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written

ALSO BY MITCH ALBOM

permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address: Hyperion, 77 West 66th Tuesdays with Morrie

Street, New York, New York 10023-6298.

Fab Five

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Bo

Albom, Mitch.

Live Album

The five people you meet in heaven / Mitch Albom. Live Album I

p. cm.

Live Albom I I

ISBN 0-7868-6871-6 (alk. paper)

Live Albom IV

1. Accident victims—Fiction. 2. Amusement

parks—Fiction. 3. Amusement rides—Fiction. 4. Future The Five
People You Meet in Heaven

life—Fiction. 5. Aged men—Fiction. 6. Heaven-Fiction. 7. Mitch
Albom

Death—Fiction. I. Title. PS3601.L335F59 2003 813'.6-dc21

NEW YORK

2003047888

YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU

Hyperion books are available for special promotions and premiums.
For details con_tact Michael Rentas, Manager, Copyright 1913
(Renewed) Broadway Music Corp, Edwin Inventory and Premium

Sales, Hyperion, 77 West 66th H. Morris Co., Redwood Music Ltd. Al
rights on behalf of Street, 11th floor, New York, New York
10023-6298, or Broadway Music Corp administered by Sony/ATV
Music cal 212-456-0133.

Publishing, 8 Music Square, Nashvil e, TN 37203. Al rights reserved.
Used by permission.

FIRST EDITION

This book is dedicated to Edward Beitchman, my beloved uncle, who
gave me my first concept of heaven. Every year, around the
Thanksgiving table, he spoke of a night in the hospital when he awoke
to see the souls of his departed loved ones sitting on the edge of the
bed, waiting for him. I never forgot that story. And I never forgot him.
Everyone has an idea of heaven, as do most religions, and they should
al be respected. The version represented here is only a guess, a wish,
in some ways, that my uncle, and others like him—people who felt
unimportant here on earth—realize, final y, how much they mattered

and how they were loved.

The Five People You Meet in Heaven

AT THE TIME of his death, Eddie was a squat, whitehaired old man, with a short neck, a barrel chest, thick fore_arms, and a faded army tattoo on his right shoulder. His legs were thin and veined now, and his left knee, wounded in the war, was ruined by arthritis. He used a cane to get around. His face was broad and craggy from the sun, with salty whiskers and a lower jaw that protruded slightly, making him look prouder than he felt. He kept a cigarette The End

behind his left ear and a ring of keys hooked to his belt. He wore rubber-soled shoes. He wore an old linen cap. His pale brown uni_form suggested a workingman, and a

workingman he was.

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT A MAN named Eddie and it begins at the end, with Eddie dying in the sun. It might seem strange to start a story with an ending. But al endings are also beginnings. We just don't know it at the time. EDDIE'S JOB WAS "maintaining" the rides, which real y meant keeping them safe. Every afternoon, he walked the park, checking on each attraction, from the Tilt-A-Whirl to the Pipeline Plunge. He looked for broken boards, loose bolts, worn-out steel. Sometimes he would stop, his eyes THE LAST HOUR of Eddie's life was spent, like most of glazing over, and people walking past thought something the others, at Ruby Pier, an amusement park by a great gray was wrong. But he was listening, that's al . After al these ocean. The park had the usual attractions, a boardwalk, a years he could hear trouble, he said, in the spits and Ferris wheel, rol er coasters, bumper cars, a taffy stand, and stut_ters and thrumming of the equipment.

an arcade where you could shoot streams of water into a clown's mouth. It also had a big new ride cal ed Freddy's Free Fal , and this would be where Eddie would be kil ed, in an accident that would make newspapers around the state. WITH 50 MINUTES left on earth, Eddie took his last walk along Ruby Pier. He passed an elderly couple.

"Folks," he mumbled, touching his cap. in like cold hands to a fire. They hugged his leg. They They nodded politely. Customers knew Eddie. At least the played with his keys. Eddie mostly grunted, never saying regular ones did. They saw him summer after summer, one much. He figured it was because he didn't say much that of those faces you associate with a place. His work shirt had they liked him.

a patch on the chest that read EDDIE above the word MAINTENANCE, and sometimes they would say, "Hiya, Eddie Maintenance," although he never thought that was funny.

THIRTY MINUTES LEFT.

Today, it so happened, was Eddie's birthday, his 83rd. A doctor, last week, had told him he had shingles. Shin_gles?

"Hey, happy birthday, I hear," Dominguez said. Eddie didn't even know what they were. Once, he had been strong enough to lift a carousel horse in each arm. That was Eddie grunted.

a long time ago.

"No party or nothing?"

Eddie looked at him as if he were crazy. For a moment he thought how strange it was to be growing old in a place that

"EDDIE!" . . . "TAKE ME, Eddie!" . . . "Take me!" smel ed of cotton candy.

Forty minutes until his death. Eddie made his way to the

"Wel , remember, Eddie, I'm off next week, starting front of the rol er coaster line. He rode every attraction at Monday. Going to Mexico."

least once a week, to be certain the brakes and steering were solid. Today was coaster day—the "Ghoster Coaster" they Eddie nodded, and Dominguez did a little dance. cal ed this one—and the kids who knew Eddie yel ed to get in the cart with him.

"Me and Theresa. Gonna see the whole family. Par-r-r-ty." Children liked Eddie. Not teenagers. Teenagers gave him He stopped dancing when he noticed Eddie staring. headaches. Over the years, Eddie figured he'd seen every sort of do-nothing, snarl-at-you teenager there was. But

"You ever been?" Dominguez said.

children were different. Children looked at Eddie—who, with his protruding lower jaw, always seemed to be

"Been?"

grinning, like a dolphin—and they trusted him. They drew

"To Mexico?"

Eddie exhaled through his nose. "Kid, I never been anywhere I wasn't shipped to with a rifle." TWENTY-SIX MINUTES to live. Eddie crossed the

boardwalk to the south end. Business was slow. The girl He watched Dominguez return to the sink. He thought for a behind the taffy counter was leaning on her elbows, moment. Then he took a small wad of bills from his pocket popping her gum.

and removed the only twenties he had, two of them. He held them out.

Once, Ruby Pier was the place to go in the summer. It had elephants and fireworks and marathon dance contests. But

"Get your wife something nice," Eddie said. people didn't go to ocean piers much anymore; they went to theme parks where you paid \$75 a ticket and had your Dominguez regarded the money, broke into a huge smile, photo taken with a giant furry character.

and said, "C'mon, man. You sure?"

Eddie limped past the bumper cars and fixed his eyes on a Eddie pushed the money into Dominguez's palm. Then he group of teenagers leaning over the railing. Great, he told walked out back to the storage area. A small "fishing hole" himself. Just what I need.

had been cut into the boardwalk planks years ago, and Eddie lifted the plastic cap. He tugged on a nylon line that

"Off," Eddie said, tapping the railing with his cane. C'mon. dropped 80 feet to the sea. A piece of bologna was still It's not safe.

attached.

"We catch anything?" Dominguez yelled. "Tell me we caught something!"

Whrrrssh, A wave broke on the beach. Eddie coughed up Eddie wondered how the guy could be so optimistic. There something he did not want to see. He spat it away. was never anything on that line.

Whrrrssh. He used to think a lot about Marguerite. Not

"One day," Dominguez yelled, "we're gonna get a halibut!" so much

now. She was like a wound beneath an old bandage, and he had grown more used to the bandage.

"Yep," Eddie mumbled, although he knew you could never pull a fish that big through a hole that small. Whrrsssssh.

What was shingles?

around. He cursed.

Whrrsssssh.

The key was gone.

Sixteen minutes to live.

FOURTEEN MINUTES UNTIL his death. Eddie wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Out on the ocean, diamonds of NO STORY SITS by itself. Sometimes stories meet at sunlight danced on the water,

and Eddie stared at their corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, nimble movement. He had not been right on his feet since like stones beneath a river.

the war.

The end of Eddie's story was touched by another seemingly But back at the Stardust Band Shell with Marguerite—there innocent story, months earlier—a cloudy night when a Eddie had still been graceful.

He closed his eyes and young man arrived at Ruby Pier with three of his friends. He owed himself to summon the song that brought them together, the one Judy Garland sang in that movie. It The young man, whose name was Nicky, had just begun mixed in his head now with the cacophony of the crashing driving and was still not comfortable carrying a key chain. waves and children screaming on the rides.

So he removed the single car key and put it in his jacket pocket, then tied the jacket around his waist.

"You made me love you—"

For the next few hours, he and his friends rode all the Whssshhhh.

fastest rides: the Flying Falcon, the Splashdown, Freddy's Free Fall, the Ghoster Coaster.

"—do it, I didn't want to do i—"

"Hands in the air!" one of them yelled. Spl l ldddaashhhhhh.

They threw their hands in the air.

"—me love you—"

Later, when it was dark, they returned to the car lot, Eeeeeeee!

exhausted and laughing, drinking beer from brown paper bags. Nicky reached into his jacket pocket. He fished

"—time you knew it, and al the—"

Chhhhewisshhhh.

"C'mon, kiddo. I don't have al day."

"-knew it. . ."

"Can you make me an animal? Can you?" Eddie felt her hands on his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes Eddie looked up, as if he had to think about it. Then he tightly, to bring the memory closer.

reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out three yellow pipe cleaners, which he carried for just this purpose.

"Yesssss!" the little girl said, slapping her hands. TWELVE MINUTES TO live.

Eddie began twisting the pipe cleaners.

" 'Scuse me."

"Where's your parents?"

A young girl, maybe eight years old, stood before him,

"Riding the rides."

blocking his sunlight. She had blonde curls and wore flipflops and denim cutoff shorts and a lime green T-shirt with

"Without you?"

a cartoon duck on the front. Amy, he thought her name was. Amy or Annie. She'd been here a lot this summer, The girl shrugged. "My

mom's with her boyfriend." al_though Eddie never saw a mother or father.

Eddie looked up. Oh.

" 'Scuuuse me," she said again. "Eddie Maint'nance?" He bent the pipe cleaners into several smal loops, then Eddie sighed. "Just Eddie," he said. twisted the loops around one another. His hands shook now, so it took longer than it used to, but soon the pipe cleaners

"Eddie?"

resembled a head, ears, body, and tail.

"Um hmm?"

"A rabbit?" the little girl said.

"Can you make me . . ."

Eddie winked.

She put her hands together as if praying.

"Thaaaank you!"

whirring engine of a smal biplane, dragging an ad from its She spun away, lost in that place where kids don't even tail. And this.

know their feet are moving. Eddie wiped his brow again, then closed his eyes, slumped into the beach chair, and tried

"OH MY GOD! LOOK!"

to get the old song back into his head.

Eddie felt his eyes dart beneath his lids. Over the years, he A seagul squawked as it flew overhead.

had come to know every noise at Ruby Pier and could sleep through them al like a lul aby.

This voice was not in the lul aby.

HOW DO PEOPLE choose their final words? Do they

"OH MY GOD! LOOK!"

re_alize their gravity? Are they fated to be wise?

Eddie bolted upright. A woman with fat, dimpled arms was By his 83rd birthday, Eddie had lost nearly everyone he'd holding a shopping bag and pointing and screaming. A cared about. Some had died young, and some had been smal crowd gathered around her, their eyes to the skies. given a chance to grow old before a disease or an accident took them away. At their funerals, Eddie listened as Eddie saw it immediately. Atop Freddy's Free Fal , the new mourn_ers recal ed their final conversations. "It's as if he

"tower drop" attraction, one of the carts was tilted at an knew he was going to die. . . ." some would say. angle, as if trying to dump its cargo. Four passengers, two men, two women, held only by a safety bar, were grabbing Eddie never believed that. As far as he could tel , when frantical y at anything they could.

your time came, it came, and that was that. You might say something smart on your way out, but you might just as

"OH MY GOD!" the fat woman yel ed. "THOSE PEOPLE!

easily say something stupid.

THEY'RE GONNA FALL!"

For the record, Eddie's final words would be "Get back!"

A voice squawked from the radio on Eddie's belt. "Eddie!

Eddie!"

He pressed the button. "I see it! Get security!" HERE ARE THE sounds of Eddie's last minutes on earth. People ran up from the beach, pointing as if they had Waves crashing. The distant thump of rock music. The practiced this dril . Look! Up in the sky! An amusement ride turned evil! Eddie grabbed his cane and clomped to safety Eddie's head was pounding. Although his park had been fence around the platform base, his wad of keys jan_gling free of any major accidents, he knew the horror stories of against his hip. His heart was racing.

his business. Once, in Brighton, a bolt unfastened on a gondola ride and two people fel to their death. Another Freddy's Free Fal was supposed to drop two carts in a time, in Wonderland Park, a man had tried to walk across a stomach-churning descent, only to be halted at the last rol er coaster track; he fel through and got stuck beneath

instant by a gush of hydraulic air. How did one cart come his armpits. He was wedged in, screaming, and the cars loose like that? It was tilted just a few feet below the upper came racing toward him and . . . wel , that was the worst. platform, as if it had started downward then changed its mind.

Eddie pushed that from his mind. There were people all around him now, hands over their mouths, watching Eddie reached the gate and had to catch his breath. Dominguez climb the ladder. Eddie tried to remember the Dominguez came running and nearly banged into him. insides of Freddy's Free Fall . Engine. Cylinders. Hydraulics. Seals. Cables. How does a cart come loose? He

"Listen to me!" Eddie said, grabbing Dominguez by the forehead the ride visually, from the four frightened people at shoulders. His grip was so tight, Dominguez made a pained the top, down the towering shaft, and into the base. Engine. face. "Listen to me! Who's up there?" Cylinders. Hydraulics. Seals. Cables. . .

"Willie."

Dominguez reached the upper platform. He did as Eddie told him, holding Willie as Willie leaned toward the back of

"OK. He must've hit the emergency stop. That's why the the cart to release the restraint. One of the female riders cart is hanging. Get up the ladder and tell Willie to manually lunged for Willie and nearly pulled him off the platform. release the safety restraint so those people can get out. OK?

The crowd gasped.

It's on the back of the cart, so you're gonna have to hold him while he leans out there. OK? Then . . . then, the two of

"Wait. . ." Eddie said to himself.

ya's—the two of ya's now, not one, you got it?—the two of ya's get them out! One holds the other! Got it!? . . . Got it?" Willie tried again. This time he popped the safety release. Dominguez nodded quickly.

"Cable . . ." Eddie mumbled.

"Then send that damn cart down so we can figure out what The bar lifted and the crowd went "Ahhhhh." The riders happened!"

were quickly pulled to the platform.

"The cable is unraveling. . . ."

"NO, NO, NO, DON'T!"

And Eddie was right. Inside the base of Freddy's Free Fall, Eddie turned to the crowd. "GET BACK!" hidden from view, the cable that lifted Cart No. 2 had, for the last few months, been scraping across a locked pulley. Something in Eddie's voice must have caught the people's attention; they stopped cheering and began to scatter. An cable's steel wires—as if husking an ear of corn—until they opening cleared around the bottom of Freddy's Free Fall. were nearly severed. No one noticed. How could they notice? Only someone who had

crawled inside the And Eddie saw the last face of his life.

mechanism would have seen the unlikely cause of the problem.

She was sprawled upon the ride's metal base, as if someone had knocked her into it, her nose running, tears filling her The pulley was wedged by a small object that must have eyes, the little girl with the pipe-cleaner animal. Amy?

fallen through the opening at a most precise moment. Annie?

A car key.

"Ma ... Mom ... Mom ..." she heaved, almost rhythmically, her body frozen in the paralysis of crying children.

"Ma . . . Mom ... Ma ... Mom .. ."

"DON'T RELEASE THE CART!" Eddie yelled. He waved Eddie's eyes shot from her to the carts. Did he have time?

his arms. "HEY! HEEEEY! IT'S THE CABLE! DON'T

Her to the carts—

RELEASE THE CART! IT'LL SNAP!"

Whump. Too late. The carts were dropping. Jesus, he The crowd drowned him out. It cheered wildly as Willie released the brake!—and for Eddie, everything slipped into and Dominguez unloaded the final rider. All four were safe. watery motion. He dropped his cane and

pushed off his bad leg. They hugged atop the platform.

leg and felt a shot of pain that almost knocked him down. A big step. Another step. Inside the shaft of Freddy's Free Fall ,

"DOM! WILLIE!" Eddie yelled. Someone banged against the cable snapped its final thread and ripped across his waist, knocking his walkie-talkie to the ground. Eddie hydraulic line. Cart No. 2 was in a dead drop now, nothing bent to get it. Willie went to the controls. He put his finger to stop it, a boulder off a cliff.

on the green button. Eddie looked up.

In those final moments, Eddie seemed to hear the whole world: distant screaming, waves, music, a rush of wind, a low, loud, ugly sound that he realized was his own voice. He follows her down the hallway to the newborns' nursery, blasting through his chest. The little girl raised her arms. His shoes clap on the floor.

Eddie lunged. His bad leg buckled. He half flew, half stumbled toward her, landing on the metal platform, which

"Wait here," she says.

ripped through his shirt and split open his skin, just beneath the patch that read EDDIE and MAINTENANCE. He felt. Through the glass, he sees her check the numbers of the two hands in his own, two small hands.

wooden cribs. She moves past one, not his, another, not his, another, not his, another, not his.

A stunning impact.

She stops. There. Beneath the blanket. A tiny head covered. A blinding flash of light.

in a blue cap. She checks her clipboard again, then points. And then, nothing.

The father breathes heavily, nods his head. For a moment, his face seems to crumble, like a bridge collapsing into a river. Then he smiles.

His.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

It is the 1920s, a crowded hospital in one of the poorest sections of the city. Eddie's father smokes cigarettes in the waiting room, where the other fathers are also smoking The Journey

cigarettes. The nurse enters with a clipboard. She calls his name. She mispronounces it. The other men blow smoke.

EDDIE SAW NOTHING OF HIS FINAL MOMENT on

Wel ?

earth, nothing of the pier or the crowd or the shattered fiber_glass cart.

He raises his hand.

In the stories about life after death, the soul often floats

"Congratulations," the nurse says.

above the good-bye moment, hovering over police cars at highway accidents, or clinging like a spider to hospital Did I save her?

room ceilings. These are people who receive a second chance, who somehow, for some reason, resume their place Did she live?

in the world.

Where...

Eddie, it appeared, was not getting a second chance.

...is my worry?

WHERE . . . ? Where...? Where...? The sky was a misty pumpkin shade, then a deep turquoise, then a bright lime. Where is my pain?

Eddie was floating, and his arms were still extended. That was what was missing. Every hurt he'd ever suffered, Where... ?

every ache he'd ever endured—it was all as gone as an expired breath. He could not feel agony. He could not feel The tower cart was falling. He remembered that. The little sadness. His consciousness felt smoky, wisplike, incapable girl—Amy? Annie?—she was crying. He remembered that. of anything but calm. Below him now, the colors changed He remembered lunging. He remembered hitting the

again. Something was swirling. Water. An ocean. He was platform. He felt her two small hands in his.

floating over a vast yellow sea. Now it turned melon. Now it was sapphire. Now he began to drop, hurtling toward the Then what?

surface. It was faster than anything he'd ever imagined, yet there wasn't as much as a breeze on his face, and he felt no Did I save her?

fear. He saw the sands of a golden shore.

Eddie could only picture it at a distance, as if it happened Then he was under water.

years ago. Stranger still, he could not feel any emotions that went with it. He could only feel calm, like a child in the Then everything was silent.

cradle of its mother's arms.

Where is my worry?

Where...?

Where is my pain?

The sky around him changed again, to grapefruit yellow, then a forest green, then a pink that Eddie momentarily associated with, of all things, cotton candy.

"Careful, Mickey!" Eddie's mother yells. Eddie's father looks up, smirks, then returns to his card game. Today Is Eddie's Birthday

"Ho, ho. I got 'im," Mickey says. "Now. One birthday bump He is five years old. It is a Sunday afternoon at Ruby Pier. for every year."

Picnic tables are set along the boardwalk, which overlooks the long white beach. There is a vanilla cake with blue wax Mickey lowers Eddie gently, until his head brushes the candles. There is a bowl of orange juice. The pier workers floor.

are milling about, the barkers, the sideshow acts, the animal trainers, some men from the fishery. Eddie's father,

"One!"

as usual, is in a card game. Eddie plays at his feet. His older brother,

Joe, is doing push-ups in front of a group of Mickey lifts Eddie back up. The others join in, laughing. elderly women, who feign interest and clap politely. They yel , "Two!... Three!"

Eddie is wearing his birthday gift, a red cowboy hat and a Upside down, Eddie is not sure who is who. His head is toy holster. He gets up and runs from one group to the next, getting heavy.

pul ing out the toy gun and going, "Bang, bang!"

"Four!..." they shout. "Five!"

"C'mere boy," Mickey Shea beckons from a bench. Eddie is flipped right-side up and put down. Everybody

"Bang, bang," goesEddie.

claps. Eddie reaches for his hat, then stumbles over. He gets up, wobbles to Mickey Shea, and punches him in the Mickey Shea works with Eddie's dad, fixing the rides. He is arm.

fat and wears suspenders and is always singing Irish songs. To Eddie, he smel s funny, like cough medicine.

"Ho-ho! What was that for, little man?" Mickey says. Every_one laughs. Eddie turns and runs away, three steps,

"C'mere. Lemme do your birthday bumps," he says. "Like before being swept into his mothers arms.

we do in Ireland."

"Are you al right, my darling birthday boy?" She is only Suddenly, Mickey's large hands are under Eddie's he is inches from his face. He sees her deep red lipstick and her hoisted up, then flipped over and dangled by the feet. plump, soft cheeks and the wave of her auburn hair. Eddie's hat fal s off.

"I was upside down," he tel s her.

But now there was no cane, so Eddie exhaled and tried to

"I saw, "she says.

pul himself up. Surprisingly, his back did not hurt. His leg did not throb. He yanked harder and hoisted himself easily She puts his hat back on his head. Later, she wil walk him over the edge of the teacup,

landing awkwardly on the along the pier, perhaps take him on an elephant ride, or ground, where he was struck by three quick thoughts. watch the fishermen pul in their evening nets, the fish flipping like shiny, wet coins. She wil hold his hand and tel First, he felt wonderful.

him God is proud of him for being a good boy on his birthday, and that wil make the world feel right-side up Second, he was al alone.

again.

Third, he was stil on Ruby Pier.

But it was a different Ruby Pier now. There were can_vas tents and vacant grassy sections and so few obstructions you could see the mossy breakwater out in the ocean. The colors of the attractions were firehouse reds and creamy whites—no teals or maroons—and each ride had its own The Arrival

wooden ticket booth. The teacup he had awoken in was part of a primitive attraction cal ed Spin-O-Rama. Its sign was EDDIE AWOKE IN A TEACUP.

plywood, as were the other low-slung signs, hinged on storefronts that lined the promenade:

It was a part of some old amusement park ride—a large teacup, made of dark, polished wood, with a cushioned seat and a steel-hinged door. Eddie's arms and legs dangled over the edges. The sky continued to change colors, from a shoeleather brown to a deep scarlet. El Tiempo Cigars! Now, That's a Smoke!

His instinct was to reach for his cane. He had kept it by his Chowder, 10 cents!

bed the last few years, because there were mornings when he no longer had the strength to get up without it. This Ride the Whipper—The Sensation of the Age!

embarrassed Eddie, who used to punch men in the shoulders when he greeted them.

along the boardwalk, past a bait-and-tackle stand for fisherman (five cents) and a bathing suit rental stand for Eddie blinked hard. This was the Ruby Pier of his swimmers (three cents). He ran past a chute ride cal ed The child_hood, some 75 years ago, only everything was new,

Dipsy Doodle. He ran along the Ruby Pier Promenade, freshly scrubbed. Over there was the Loop-the-Loop beneath

magnificent buildings of moorish design with ride—which had been torn down decades ago—and over spires and minarets and onion-shaped domes. He ran past there the bath_houses and the saltwater swimming pools the Parisian Carousel, with its carved wooden horses, glass that had been razed in the 1950s. Over there, jutting into the mirrors, and Wurlitzer organ, al shiny and new. Only an sky, was the original Ferris wheel—in its pristine white hour ago, it seemed, he had been scraping rust from its paint—and be_yond that, the streets of his old

pieces in ths shop.

neighborhood and the rooftops of the crowded brick tenements,with laundry lines hanging from the windows. He ran down the heart of the old midway, where the weight Eddie tried to yel , but his voice was raspy air. He mouthed guessers, fortune-tel ers, and dancing gypsies had once a "Hey!" but nothing came from his throat. worked. He lowered his chin and held his arms out like a glider, and every few steps he would jump, the way children He grabbed at his arms and legs. Aside from his lack of do, hoping running wil turn to flying. It might have seemed voice, he felt incredible. He walked in a circle.

He jumped. ridiculous to anyone watching, this white-haired No pain. In the last ten years, he had forgotten what it was maintenaance worker, al alone, making like an airplane. But like to walk without wincing or to sit without struggling to the running boy is inside every man, no matter how old he find comfort for his lower back. On the outside, he looked gets.

the same as he had that morning: a squat barrel-chested old man in a cap and shorts and a brown maintenance jersey. But he was limber. So limber, in fact, he could touch behind his ankles, and raise a leg to his bel y. He explored his body like an infant, fascinated by the new mechanics, a rubber AND THEN EDDIE stopped running. He heard something. man doing a rubber man stretch.

A voice, tinny, as if coming through a megaphone. Then he ran.

How about him, ladies and gentlemen? Have you ever seen such a horrible sight? . . . "

Ha-ha! Running! Eddie had not truly run in more than 60

years, not since the war, but he was running now, starting Eddie was standing by an empty ticket kiosk in front of a with a few gingerly steps, then accelerating into a full gait, large theater. The sign above read

faster, faster, like the running boy of his youth. He ran bars, as patrons walked past them, leering and pointing. A barker would bal yhoo the oddity, and it was a barker's voice that Eddie heard now.

The World's most Curious Citizens.

"Only a terrible twist of fate could leave a man in such a Ruby pier's Sideshow!

pitiful condition! From the farthest corner of the world, we have brought him for your examination__" Holy Smoke! They're Fat! They're Skinny!

Eddie entered the darkened hall . The voice grew louder. See the Wild Man!

"This tragic soul has endured a perversion of nature__" It was coming from the other side of a stage.

The sideshow. The freak house. The bal yhoo hall . Eddie

"Only here, at the World's Most Curious Citizens, can you recall them shutting this down at least 50 years ago, about draw this near...."

the time television became popular and people didn't need sideshows to tickle their imagination.

Eddie pulled aside the curtain.

"Look well upon this savage, born into a most peculiar

"Feast your eyes upon the most unusual— " handicap ..."

The barker's voice vanished. And Eddie stepped back in Eddie peered into the entrance. He had encountered some disbelief.

odd people here. There was Jolly Jane, who weighed over 500 pounds and needed two men to push her up the stairs. There, sitting in a chair, alone on the stage, was a middleThere were conjoined twin sisters, who shared a spine and aged man with narrow, stooped shoulders, naked from the waist played musical instruments. There were men who

waist up. His belly sagged over his belt. His hair was swallowed by swords, women with beards, and a pair of Indian closely cropped. His lips were thin and his face was long brothers whose skin went rubbery from being stretched and and drawn. Eddie would have long since forgotten him, soaked in oils, until it hung in bunches from their limbs. was it not for one distinctive feature.

Eddie, as a child, had felt sorry for the sideshow cast. They His skin was blue.

were forced to sit in booths or on stages, sometimes behind

"Hello, Edward," he said. "I have been waiting for you."

"Tell me something," the Blue Man said. He pointed to a two-humped wooden roller coaster in the distance. The Whipper. It was built in the 1920s, before under-friction wheels, meaning the cars couldn't turn very quickly—unless you wanted them launching off the track. "The Whipper. Is it still the 'fastest ride on earth'?"

Eddie looked at the old clanking thing, which had been torn The First Person Eddie Meets in Heaven

down years ago. He shook his head no.

DON'T BE AFRAID...." THE BLUE MAN said, rising

"Ah," the Blue Man said. "I imagined as much. Things slowly from his chair. "Don't be afraid. . . ." don't change here. And there's none of that peering down from the clouds, I'm afraid."

His voice was soothing, but Eddie could only stare. He had barely known this man. Why was he seeing him now? He Here? Eddie thought.

was like one of those faces that pops into your dreams and the next morning you say, "You'll never guess who I The Blue Man smiled as if he'd heard the question. He dreamed about last night."

touched Eddie's shoulder and Eddie felt a surge of warmth unlike anything he had ever felt before. His thoughts came

"Your body feels like a child's, right?" spilling out like sentences.

Eddie nodded.

How did I die?

"You were a child when you knew me, that's why. "You

'An accident," the Blue Man said.

start with the same feelings you had."

How long have I been dead?

Start what? Eddie thought.

'A minute. An hour. A thousand years."

The Blue Man lifted his chin. His skin was a grotesque shade, a graying blueberry. His fingers were wrinkled. He Where am I?

walked outside. Eddie followed. The pier was empty. The beach was empty. Was the entire planet empty?

The Blue Man pursed his lips, then repeated the question thoughtfully. "Where are you?" He turned and raised his arms. All at once, the rides at the old Ruby Pier cranked to some kind of blessed resting place was beyond his life: The Ferris wheel spun, the Dodgem Cars smacked into imagination.

each other, the Whipper clacked uphill, and the Parisian Carousel horses bobbed on their brass poles to the cheery He tried again to speak, and this time he heard a small grunt music of the Wurlitzer organ. The ocean was in front of him from his chest. The Blue Man turned.

them. The sky was the color of lemons.

"Your voice will come. We all go through the same thing.

"Where do you think?" the Blue Man asked. "Heaven." You cannot talk when you first arrive." He smiled. "It helps you listen."

NO! EDDIE SHOOK his head violently. NO! The Blue Man seemed amused.

"THERE ARE FIVE people you meet in heaven," the Blue Man suddenly said. "Each of us was in your life for a

"No? It can't be heaven?" he said. "Why? Because this is reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, where you grew up?"

and that is what heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth."

Eddie mouthed the word Yes.

Eddie looked confused.

"Ah." The Blue Man nodded. "Well. People often belittle the place where they were born. But heaven can be found in

"People think of heaven as a paradise garden, a place where the most unlikely corners. And heaven itself has many they can float on clouds and laze in rivers and mountains. steps. This, for me, is the second. And for you, the first." But scenery without solace is meaningless.

He led Eddie through the park, passing cigar shops and

"This is the greatest gift God can give you: to understand sausage stands and the "flat joints," where suckers lost their what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the nickels and dimes.

peace you have been searching for."

Heaven? Eddie thought. Ridiculous. He had spent most of Eddie coughed, trying to bring up his voice. He was tired of his adult life trying to get away from Ruby Pier. It was an being silent.

amusement park, that's all, a place to scream and get wet and trade your dollars for kewpie dolls. The thought that this was

"I am your first person, Edward. When I died, my life was illuminated by five others, and then I came here to wait for He is seven years old and his gift is a new baseball. He you, to stand in your line, to tell you my story, which squeezes it in each hand, feeling a surge of power that runs becomes part of yours. There will be others for you, too. up his arms. He imagines he is one of his heroes on the Some you my story, which squeezes it in each hand, feeling a surge of power that runs becomes part of yours. There will be others for you, too. up his arms. He imagines he is one of his heroes on the Some you knew, maybe some you didn't. But they all Cracker Jack collector cards, maybe the great pitcher crossed your path before they died. And they altered it Walter Johnson.

forever."

"Here, toss it," his brother, Joe, says. Eddie pushed a sound up from his chest, as hard as he could.

They are running along the midway, past the game booth where, if

you knock over three green bottles, you win a

"What . . ." he finally croaked.

coconut and a straw.

His voice seemed to be breaking through a shell, like a baby

"Come on, Eddie," Joe says. "Share." chick.

Eddie stops, and imagines himself in a stadium. He throws

"What. . . killed . . ."

the ball. His brother pulls in his elbows and ducks. The Blue Man waited patiently.

"Too hard!" Joe yells.

"What... killed .. . you?"

"My ball!" Eddie screams. "Dang you, Joe." The Blue Man looked a bit surprised. He smiled at Eddie. Eddie watches it thump down the boardwalk and bang off a post into a small clearing behind the sideshow tents. He

"Yobu did," he said.

runs after it. Joe follows. They drop to the ground.

"You see it?" Eddie says.

"Nuh-uh."

A whumping noise interrupts them. A tent flap opens. Eddie and Joe look up. There is a grossly fat woman and a Today Is Eddie's Birthday shirtless man with reddish hair covering his entire body. Freaks from the freak show.

"Like most immigrants, we had no money. We slept on a The children freeze.

mattress in my uncle's kitchen. My father was forced to take a job in a sweatshop, sewing buttons on coats. When I was

"What are you wiseacres doin' back, here?" the hairy man then, he took

me from school and I joined him." says, grinning. "Lookin' for trouble?" Eddie watched the Blue Man's pitted face, his thin lips, his Joe's lip trembles. He starts to cry. He jumps up and runs sagging chest. Why is he tel ing me this? Eddie thought. away, his arms pumping wildly. Eddie rises, too, then sees his bal against a sawhorse.

He eyes the shirtless man and

"I was a nervous child by nature, and the noise in the shop moves slowly toward it.

only made things worse. I was too young to be there, amongst al those men, swearing and complaining.

"This is mine," he mumbles. He scoops up the bal and runs after his brother.

"Whenever the foreman came near, my father told me,

'Look down. Don't make him notice you.' Once, however, I stumbled and dropped a sack of buttons, which spil ed over the floor. The foreman screamed that I was worthless, a worthless child, that I must go. I can stil see that moment, my father pleading with him like a street beggar, the fore_man sneering, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. I felt my stomach twist in pain. Then I felt something

"LISTEN, MISTER," EDDIE rasped, "I never kil ed you, wet on my leg. I looked down. The foreman pointed at my OK? I don't even know you."

soiled pants and laughed, and the other workers laughed, too.

The Blue Man sat on a bench. He smiled as if trying to put a guest at ease. Eddie remained standing, a defensive posture.

"After that, my father refused to speak to me. He felt I had shamed him, and I suppose, in his world, I had. But fathers

"Let me begin with my real name," the Blue Man said. "I can ruin their sons, and I was, in a fashion, ruined after that. was christened Joseph Corvelzchik, the son of a tailor in a I was a nervous child, and when I grew, I was a nervous smal Polish vil age. We came to America in 1894. I was young man. Worst of al , at night, I stil wet the bed. In the only a boy. My mother held me over the railing of the ship mornings I would sneak the soiled sheets to the washbasin and this became my earliest childhood memory, my mother and soak them. One morning, I looked up to see my father. swinging me in the

breezes of a new world.

He saw the dirty sheets, then glared at me with eyes that I will never forget, as if he wished he could snap the cord of life between us."

And my life as a commodity had begun."

The Blue Man paused. His skin, which seemed to be soaked Eddie noticed the resigned look on the Blue Man's face. He in blue fluid, folded in small fatty layers around his belt. had often wondered where the sideshow cast came from. He Eddie couldn't help staring.

assumed there was a sad story behind every one of them.

"I was not always a freak, Edward," he said. "But back

"The carnivals gave me my names, Edward. Sometimes I then, medicine was rather primitive. I went to a chemist, was the Blue Man of the North Pole, or the Blue Man of seeking something for my nerves.

He gave me a bottle of Algeria, or the Blue Man of New Zealand. I had never been silver nitrate and told me to mix it with water and take it to any of these places, of course, but it was pleasant to be every night. Silver nitrate. It was later considered poison. considered exotic, if only on a painted sign. The 'show' was But it was all I had, and when it failed to work, I could only simple. I would sit on the stage, half undressed, as people assume I was not ingesting enough. So I took more. I walked past and the barker told them how pathetic I was. swallowed two gulps and sometimes three, with no water. For this, I was able to put a few coins in my pocket. The manager once called me the 'best freak' in his stable, and,

"Soon, people were looking at me strangely. My skin was sad as it sounds, I took pride in that. When you are turning the color of ash.

outcast, even a tossed stone can be cherished.

"I was ashamed and agitated. I swallowed even more silver

"One winter, I came to this pier. Ruby Pier. They were nitrate, until my skin went from gray to blue, a side effect of starting a sideshow called The Curious Citizens. I liked the the poison."

idea of being in one place, escaping the bumpy horse carts of carnival life.

The Blue Man paused. His voice dropped. "The factory dismissed me. The foreman said I scared the other workers.

"This became my home. I lived in a room above a sausage Without work, how would I eat? Where would I live?

shop. I played cards at night with the other sideshow workers, with the tinsmiths, sometimes even with your

"I found a saloon, a dark place where I could hide beneath a father. In the early mornings, if I wore long shirts and hat and coat. One night, a group of carnival men were in the draped my head in a towel, I could walk along this beach back. They smoked cigars. They laughed. One of them, a without scaring people. It may not sound like much, but for rather smal fel ow with a wooden leg, kept look_ing at me.

me, it was a freedom I had rarely known."

Final y, he approached.

He stopped. He looked at Eddie.

"By the end of the night, I had agreed to join their carnival.

"Do you understand? Why we're here? This is not your head drops momentarily. His automobile nearly col ides heaven. It's mine."

with another. The second driver honks, the man veers again, spinning the wheel, pushing on the brake pedal. He skids along an avenue then turns down an al ey. His vehicle rol s until it col ides with the rear of a parked truck. There is a smal crashing noise. The headlights shatter. The impact TAKE ONE STORY, viewed from two different angles. smacks the man into the steering wheel. His forehead Take a rainy Sunday morning in July, in the late 1920s, bleeds. He steps from the Model A, sees the damage, then when Eddie and his friends are tossing a basebal Eddie got col apses onto the wet pavement. His arm throbs. His chest for his birthday nearly a year ago. Take a moment when that hurts. It is Sunday morning. The al ey is empty. He remains bal flies over Eddie's head and out into the street. Eddie, there, unnoticed, slumped against the side of the car. The wearing tawny pants and a wool cap, chases after it, and blood from his coronary arteries no longer flows to his runs in front of an automobile, a Ford Model A. The car heart. An hour passes. A policeman finds him. A medical screeches, veers, and just misses him. He shivers, ex_hales, exam_iner pronounces him dead. The cause of death is gets the bal , and races back to his friends. The game soon listed as "heart attack."

There are no known relatives. ends and the children run to the arcade to play the Erie Digger machine, with its claw-like mechanism that picks up Take one story, viewed from two different angles. It is the small toys.

same day, the same moment, but one angle ends happily, at an arcade, with the little boy in tawny pants dropping Now take that same story from a different angle. A man is pennies into the Erie Digger machine, and the other ends behind the wheel of a Ford Model A, which he has badly, in a city morgue, where one worker calls another borrowed from a friend to practice his driving. The road is worker over to marvel at the blue skin of the newest arrival. wet from the morning rain. Suddenly, a baseball bounces across the street, and a boy comes racing after it. The driver

"You see?" the Blue Man whispered, having finished the slams on the brakes and yanks the wheel. The car skids, the story from his point of view. "Little boy?" tires screech.

Eddie felt a shiver.

The man somehow regains control, and the Model A rolls on. The child has disappeared in the rearview mirror, but

"Oh no," he whispered.

the man's body is still affected, thinking of how close he came to tragedy. The jolt of adrenaline has forced his heart to pump furiously and this heart is not a strong one and the pumping leaves him drained.

The man feels dizzy and his

"They HURT!" Eddie whines.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

"Enough!" his father yells. He glares at Eddie. Eddie goes silent.

He is eight years old. He sits on the edge of a plaid couch, his arms crossed in anger. His mother is at his feet, tying At the cemetery, Eddie barely recognizes the pier people. his shoes. His father is at the mirror, fixing his tie. The men who normally wear gold lame and red turbans are now in black suits, like his father. The women seem to be

"I don't WANT to go," Eddie says.

wearing the same black, dress; some cover their faces in veils.

"I know, "his mother says, not looking up, "but we have to. Sometimes you have to do things when sad things happen." Eddie watches a man shovel dirt into a hole. The man says something about ashes.

Eddie holds his mothers hand and

"But it's my BIRTHDAY."

squints at the sun. He is supposed to be sad, he knows, but he is secretly counting numbers, starting from 1, hoping Eddie looks mournful y across the room at the erector set in that by the time he reaches 1000 he wil have his birthday the corner, a pile of toy metal girders and three smal back.

rubber wheels. Ed_die had been making a truck. He is good at putting things together. He had hoped to show it to his friends at a birthday party. Instead, they have to go someplace and get dressed up. It isn't fair, he thinks. His brother, Joe, dressed in wool pants and a bow tie, enters with a basebal glove on his left hand. He slaps it hard. He makes a face at Eddie.

The First Lesson

"Those were my old shoes, "Joe says. "My new ones are PLEASE, MISTER . . ." EDDIE PLEADED. "I DIDN'T

better."

know. Believe me . . . God help me, I didn't know." Eddie winces. He hates having to wear Joe's old things. The Blue Man nodded. "You couldn't know. You were too young."

"Stop wiggling," his mother says.

Eddie stepped back. He squared his body as if bracing for a Some did not even know me wel , yet they came. Why? Did fight.

you ever wonder? Why people gather when others die? Why people feel they should?

"But now I gotta pay," he said. To pay?

"It is because the human spirit knows, deep down, that al

"For my sin. That's why I'm here, right? Justice?" lives intersect. That

death doesn't just take someone, it misses someone else, and in the small distance between The Blue Man smiled. "No, Edward. You are here so I can be ing taken and being missed, lives are changed. teach you something. Al the people you meet here have one thing to teach you."

"You say you should have died instead of me. But during my time on earth, people died instead of me, too. It happens Eddie was skeptical. His fists stayed clenched. every day. When lightning strikes a minute after you are gone, or an airplane crashes that you might have been on.

"What?" he said.

When your col eague fal s il and you do not. We think such things are random. But there is a balance to it al . One

"That there are no random acts. That we are al connected. withers, another grows. Birth and death are part of a whole. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind."

"It is why we are drawn to babies ..." He turned to the mourners. "And to funerals."

Eddie shook his head. "We were throwing a bal . It was my stupidity, running out there like that. Why should you have Eddie looked again at the gravesite gathering. He wondered to die on account of me?

It ain't fair."

if he'd had a funeral. He wondered if anyone came. He saw the priest reading from the Bible and the mourners lowering The Blue Man held out his hand. "Fairness," he said, "does their heads. This was the day the Blue Man had been not govern life and death. If it did, no good person would buried, al those years ago. Eddie had been there, a lit_tle ever die young."

boy, fidgeting through the ceremony, with no idea of the role he'd played in it.

He rol ed his palm upward and suddenly they were standing in a cemetery behind a smal group of mourners. A priest by

"I stil don't understand," Eddie whispered. "What good the gravesite was reading from a Bible. Eddie could not see came from your death?"

faces, only the backs of hats and dresses and suit coats.

"You lived," the Blue Man answered.

"My funeral," the Blue Man said. "Look at the mourn_ers.

"But we barely knew each other. I might as wel have been and unblemished. It was, Eddie thought, the most perfect a stranger."

skin he had ever seen.

The Blue Man put his arms on Eddie's shoulders. Ed_die

"Wait!" Eddie yel ed, but he was suddenly whisked into the felt that warm, melting sensation.

air, away from the cemetery, soaring above the great gray ocean. Below him, he saw the rooftops of old Ruby Pier, the

"Strangers," the Blue Man said, "are just family you have spires and turrets, the flags flapping in the breeze. yet to come to know."

Then it was gone.

WITH THAT, THE Blue Man pul ed Eddie close. Instantly, Eddie felt everything the Blue Man had felt in his life rush_ing into him, swimming in his body, the loneliness, the shame, the nervousness, the heart attack. It slid into Eddie like a drawer being closed.

SUNDAY, 3 P.M.

"I am leaving," the Blue Man whispered in his ear. "This step of heaven is over for me. But there are others for you to meet."

Back at the pier, the crowd stood silently around the

"Wait," Eddie said, pul ing back. "Just tel me one thing. wreck_age of Freddy's Free Fal . Old women touched their Did I save the little girl? At the pier. Did I save her?" throats. Mothers pul ed their children away. Several burly men in tank tops slid to the front, as if this were something The Blue Man did not answer. Eddie slumped. "Then my they should handle, but once they got there, they, too, only death was a waste, just like my life."

looked on, helpless. The sun baked down, sharpening the shadows, caus_ing them to shield their eyes as if they were

"No life is a waste," the Blue Man said. "The only time we saluting.

waste is the time we spend thinking we are alone." How bad is it? people whispered. From the back of the He stepped back toward the gravesite and smiled. And as he crowd, Dominguez burst through, his face red, his did, his skin turned the loveliest shade of caramel-smooth maintenance shirt drenched in sweat. He saw the carnage. idea—colorful heroes like the Phantom, fighting the bad

'Ahh no, no, Eddie," he moaned, grabbing his head. guys, saving the world. He has given his collection to his Security workers arrived. They pushed people back. But school-aged cousins from Romania, who came to America then, they, too, fell into impotent postures, hands on their a few months earlier. Eddie's family met them at the docks hips, waiting for the ambulances. It was as if all of them—

and they moved into the bedroom that Eddie shared with his the mothers, the fathers, the kids with their giant gulp soda brother, Joe. The cousins cannot speak English, but they like cups—were too stunned to look and too stunned to leave. comic books. Anyhow, it gives Eddie an excuse to keep them Death was at their feet, as a carnival tune played over the around.

park speakers.

"There's the birthday boy," his mother crows when he How bad is it? Sirens sounded. Men in uniforms arrived. rambles into the room. He wears a button-down white shirt Yellow tape was stretched around the area. The arcade and a blue tie, which pinches his muscular neck A grunt of booths pulled down their grates. The rides were closed helmets and raised beer glasses come from the assembled indefinitely. Word spread across the beach of the bad thing visitors, family, friends, pier workers. Eddie's father is that had happened, and by sunset, Ruby Pier was empty. playing cards in the corner, in a small cloud of cigar smoke.

"Hey, Ma, guess what?" Joe yells out. "Eddie met a girl last night."

"Oooh. Did he?"

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

Eddie feels a rush of blood.

From his bedroom, even with the door closed, Eddie can

"Yeah. Said he's gonna marry her."

smel the beefsteak his mother is gril ing with green peppers and sweet red onions, a strong woody odor that he loves.

"Shut yer trap," Eddie says to Joe.

"Eddd-deee!"she yel s from the kitchen. "Where are you?"

Joe ignores him. "Yep, he came into the room al googleEveryone's here!" eyed, and he said, 'Joe, I met the girl I'm gonna marry!' " He rol s off the bed and puts away the comic book. He is 17

Eddie seethes. "I said shut it!"

today, too old for such things, but he stil enjoys the

"What's her name, Eddie?"someone asked.. home, Eddie's mother turns on the radio. There is news about the war in Europe, and Eddie's father says something

"Does she go to church?"

about lumber and copper wire being hard to get if things get worse. That wil make maintenance of the park nearly Eddie goes to his brother and socks him in the arm. impossible.

"Owww!"

"Such awful news," Eddie s mother says. "Not at a birthday."

"Eddie!"

She turns the dial until the smal box offers music, an

"I told you to shut it!"

orchestra playing a swing melody, and she smiles and hums along. Then she comes over to Eddie, who is slouched in his Joe blurts out, "And he danced with her at the Stard—!" chair, picking at the last pieces of cake. She removes her apron, folds it over a chair, and lifts Eddie by the hands. Whack.

"Show me how you danced with your new friend," she says.

"Oww!"

"Aw, Ma."

"SHUT UP!"

"Come on."

"Eddie! Stop that!!"

Eddie stands as if being led to his execution. His brother Even the Romanian cousins look up now—fighting they smirks. But his mother, with her pretty, round face, keeps understand—as the two brothers grab each other and flail humming and stepping back and forth, until Eddie falls away, clearing the couch, until Eddie's father puts down his into a dance step with her.

cigar and yells, "Knock it off, before I slap both of ya's."

"Daaa daa deeee," she sings with the melody, "... when The brothers separate, panting and glaring. Some older you're with meeee ... da da ... the stars, and the moon ... the relatives smile. One of the aunts whispers, "He must really da ... da ... da ... in June ..."

like this girl."

They move around the living room until Eddie breaks down Later, after the special steak has been eaten and the candles and laughs. He is already taller than his mother by a good have been blown out and most of the guests have gone six inches, yet she twirls him with ease.

"So," she whispers, "you like this girl?" EDDIE FELT HIS FEET TOUCH GROUND. THE sky

Eddie loses a step.

was changing again, from cobalt blue to charcoal gray, and Eddie was surrounded now by fallen trees and blackened

"It's all right," she says. "I'm happy for you." rubble. He grabbed his arms, shoulders, thighs, and calves. He felt stronger than before, but when he tried to touch his They spin to the table, and Eddie's mother grabs Joe and toes, he could no longer do so. The limberness was gone. No pulls him up.

more childish rubbery sensation. Every muscle he had was as tight as piano wire.

"Now you two dance," she says.

He looked around at the lifeless terrain. On a nearby hill lay

"With him?"

a busted wagon and the rotting bones of an animal. Eddie felt a hot wind whip across his face. The sky exploded to a

"Ma!"

flaming yellow.

But she insists and they relent, and soon Joe and Eddie are. And once again, Eddie ran.

laughing and stumbling into each other. They join hands and move, swooping up and down in exaggerated circles. He ran differently now, in the hard measured steps of a soldier. Around and around the table they go, to their mother's soldier. He heard thunder—or something like thunder, delight, as the clarinets lead the radio melody and the explosions, or bomb blasts—and he instinctively fell to the Romanian cousins clap along and the final wisps of grilled ground, landed on his stomach, and pulled himself along by steak evaporate into the party air.

his forearms. The sky burst open and gushed rain, a thick, brownish downpour. Eddie lowered his head and crawled along in the mud, spitting away the dirty water that gathered around his lips.

Finally he felt his head brush against something solid. He looked up to see a rifle dug into the ground, with a helmet sitting atop it and a set of dog tags hanging from the grip. The Second Person Eddie Meets in Heaven

Blinking through the rain, he fingered the dog tags, then scrambled backward wildly into a porous wall of stringy vines that hung from a massive banyan tree. He dove into their darkness. He pulled his knees into a crouch. He tried to too expensive. The Miniature Railway was pretty much just catch his breath. Fear had found him, even in heaven. that, the train cars no higher than a grown man's thigh.

The name on the dog tags was his.

Eddie, before enlisting, had been working to save money to study engineering. That was his goal—he wanted to build things, even if his brother, Joe, kept saying, "C'mon, Eddie, you aren't smart enough for that."

YOUNG MEN GO to war. Sometimes because they have But once the war started, pier business dropped. Most of to, sometimes because they want to. Always, they feel they Eddie's customers now were women alone with chil_dren, are supposed to. This comes from the sad, layered stories of their fathers gone to fight. Sometimes the children asked life, which over the centuries have seen courage confused Eddie to lift them over his head, and when Eddie complied, with picking up arms, and cowardice confused with laying he saw the mothers' sad smiles: He guessed it was the right them down.

lift but the wrong pair of arms. Soon, Eddie figured, he would join those distant men, and his life of greasing tracks When his country entered the war, Eddie woke up early one and running brake levers would be over. War was his cal to rainy morning, shaved, combed back his hair, and enlisted. manhood. Maybe someone would miss him, too.

Others were fighting. He would, too.

On one of those final nights, Eddie was bent over the smal His mother did not want him to go. His father, when arcade rifle, firing with deep concentration. Pang! Pang! He informed of the news, lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out tried to imagine actual y shooting at the enemy. Pang!

slowly.

Would they make a noise when he shot them—pang!— or would they just go down, like the lions and giraffes?

"When?" was al he asked.

Pang! Pang!

Since he'd never fired an actual rifle, Eddie began to practice at the shooting arcade at Ruby Pier. You paid a

"Practicing to kil , are ya, lad?"

nickel and the machine hummed and you squeezed the trig_ger and fired metal slugs at pictures of jungle animals, Mickey Shea was standing behind Eddie. His hair was the a lion or a giraffe. Eddie went every evening, after running color of French vanil a ice cream, wet with sweat, and his the brake levers at the Li'l Folks Miniature Railway. Ruby face was red from whatever he'd been drinking. Eddie Pier had added a number of new, smal er attractions, shrugged and

returned to his shooting. Pang! Another hit. because roller coasters, after the Depression, had become Pang! Another.

"Hmmpf," Mickey grunted.

THE RAIN STOPPED. Eddie, shivering and wet beneath Eddie wished Mickey would go away and let him work on the banyan tree, exhaled a long, hard breath. He pulled the his aim. He could feel the old drunk behind him. He could vines apart and saw the rifle and helmet still stuck in the hear his labored breathing, the nasal hissing in and out, like ground. He remembered why soldiers did this: It marked the a bike tire being inflated by a pump.

graves of their dead.

Eddie kept shooting. Suddenly, he felt a painful grip on his He crawled out on his knees. Off in the distance, below a shoulder.

small ridge, were the remains of a village, bombed and burnt into little more than rubble. For a moment, Eddie

"Listen to me, lad." Mickey's voice was a low growl. "War started, his mouth slightly open, his eyes bringing the scene is no game. If there's a shot to be made, you make it, you into tighter focus. Then his chest tightened like a man who'd hear? No guilt. No hesitation, You fire and you fire and you just had bad news broken. This place. He knew it. It had don't think about who you're shootin' or killin' or why, haunted his dreams. "Small pox," a voice suddenly said. y'hear me? You want to come home again, you just fire, you don't think."

Eddie spun.

He squeezed even harder.

"Small pox. Typhoid. Tetanus. Yellow fever."

"It's the thinking that gets you killed." It came from above, somewhere in the tree.

Eddie turned and stared at Mickey. Mickey slapped him

"I never did find out what yellow fever was. Hell. I never heard on the cheek and Eddie instinctively raised his fist to meet anyone who had it."

retaliate. But Mickey belched and wobbled backward. Then he looked

at Eddie as if he were going to cry. The voice was strong, with a slight Southern drawl and mechanical gun stopped humming.

Eddie's nickel was up. gravel y edges, like a man who'd been yel ing for hours. Young men go to war, sometimes because they have to,

"I got al those shots for al those diseases and I died here sometimes because they want to. A few days later, Eddie anyhow, healthy as a horse."

packed a duffel bag and left the pier behind.

The tree shook. Some smal fruit fel in front of Eddie.

"How you like them apples?" the voice said. knew he could not fal .

Eddie stood up and cleared his throat.

"I'm dead," he said.

"Come out," he said.

"You got that much right."

"Come up," the voice said.

"And you re dead."

And Eddie was in the tree, near the top, which was as tal as

"Got that right, too."

an office building. His legs straddled a large limb and the earth below seemed a long drop away. Through the smal er

"And you're . . . my second person?" branches and thick fig leaves, Eddie could make out the shadowy figure of a man in army fatigues, sitting back The Captain held up his cigarette. He smiled as if to say, against the tree trunk. His face was covered with a coal

"Can you believe you get to smoke up here?" Then he took a black substance. His eyes glowed red like tiny bulbs. long drag and blew out a smal white cloud.

Eddie swal owed hard.

"Betcha didn't expect me, huh?"

"Captain?" he whispered. "Is that you?" EDDIE LEARNED MANY things during the war. He

learned to ride atop a tank. He learned to shave with cold THEY HAD SERVED together in the army. The Captain water in his helmet. He learned to be careful when shooting was Eddie's commanding officer. They fought in the from a foxhole, lest he hit a tree and wound himself with Philippines and they parted in the Philippines and Eddie had deflected shrapnel.

never seen him again. He had heard he'd died in combat. He learned to smoke. He learned to march. He learned to A wisp of cigarette smoke appeared.

cross a rope bridge while carrying, al at once, an overcoat, a radio, a carbine, a gas mask, a tripod for a machine gun, a

"They explained the rules to you, soldier?" backpack, and several bandoliers on his shoulder. He learned how to drink the worst coffee he'd ever tasted. Eddie looked down. He saw the earth far below, yet he He learned a few words in a few foreign languages. He was crying because there was an enemy soldier stand_ing learned to spit a great distance. He learned the nervous over him with a rifle at his head, and Eddie felt some_thing cheer of a soldier's first survived combat, when the men cold at his neck and there was one behind him, too. slap each other and smile as if it's over— We can go home now!— and he learned the sinking depression of a soldier's second combat, when he realizes the fighting does not stop at one battle, there is more and more after that. THE CAPTAIN STUBBED out his cigarette. He was older He learned to whistle through his teeth. He learned to sleep than the men in Eddie's troop, a lifetime military man with a on rocky earth. He learned that scabies are itchy little mites lanky swagger and a prominent chin that gave him a that burrow into your skin, especial y if you've worn the re_semblance to a movie actor of the day. Most of the same filthy clothes for a week. He learned a man's bones soldiers liked him wel enough, although he had a short real y do look white when they burst through the skin. temper and a habit of yel ing inches from your face, so you could see his teeth, already yel owed from tobacco. Stil , the He learned to pray quickly. He learned in which pocket to Cap_tain always promised he would "leave no one behind," keep the letters to his family and Marguerite, in case he no matter what happened, and the men took comfort in that. should be found dead by his fel ow soldiers. He learned that sometimes you are sitting next to a buddy in a dugout,

"Captain . . ." Eddie said again, still stunned. whispering about how hungry you are, and the next instant there is a small whoosh and the buddy slumps over and his

'Affirmative.'

hunger is no longer an issue.

"Sir."

He learned, as one year turned to two and two years turned toward three, that even strong, muscular men vomit on their

"No need for that. But much obliged." shoes when the transport plane is about to unload them, and even officers talk in their sleep the night before combat.

"It's been ... You look . . ."

He learned how to take a prisoner, although he never

"Like the last time you saw me?" He grinned, then spat over learned how to become one. Then one night, on a Philippine tree branch. He saw Eddie's confused expression. island, his group came under heavy fire, and they scattered

"You're right. Ain't no reason to spit up here. You don't get for shelter and the skies were lit and Eddie heard one of his sick, either. Your breath is always the same. And the chow buddies, down in a ditch, weeping like a child, and he is incredible."

yelled at him, "Shut up, will ya!" and he realized the man Chow? Eddie didn't get any of this. "Captain, look. There's Eddie nearly smiled. That was what he'd said. What they'd some mistake. I still don't know why I'm here. I had a al said. But when the war ended, nobody came. nothing life, see? I worked maintenance. I lived in the same apartment for years. I took care of rides, Ferris wheels, roller

"Yeah, I went back," Eddie said.

coasters, stupid little rocket ships. It was nothing to be proud of. I just kind of drifted. What I'm saying is . . ."

"And?"

Eddie swallowed. "What am I doing here?"

"And ... I never left. I tried. I made plans. . . . But this damn leg. I don't know. Nothin' worked out."

The Captain looked at him with those glowing red eyes and Eddie resisted asking the other question he now wondered Eddie shrugged. The Captain studied his face. His eyes after the Blue Man: Did he kill the Captain, too?

narrowed. His voice lowered.

"You know, I've been wondering," the Captain said

"You still juggle?" he asked.

rubbing his chin. "The men from our unit—did they stay in touch? Wil ingham? Morton? Smitty? Did you ever see those guys?"

Eddie remembered the names. The truth was, they had not GO! ... YOU GO! ... YOU GO!"

kept in touch. War could bond men like a magnet, but like a magnet it could repel them, too. The things they saw, the The enemy soldiers screamed and poked them with things they did. Sometimes they just wanted to forget. bayonets. Eddie, Smitty, Morton, Rabozzo, and the Captain were herded down a steep hill, hands on their heads. Mortar

"To be honest, sir, we all kind of fell out." He shrugged, shells exploded around them. Eddie saw a figure run

"Sorry."

through the trees, then fall in a clatter of bullets. The Captain nodded as if he'd expected as much. He tried to take mental snapshots as they marched in the darkness—huts, roads, whatever he could make

"And you? You went back to that fun park where we all out—knowing such information would be precious for an promised to go if we got out alive? Free rides for all GIs?

escape. A plane roared in the distance, filling Eddie with a Two girls per guy in the Tunnel of Love? Isn't that what you sudden, sickening wave of despair. It is the inner torture of said?"

every captured soldier, the short distance between freedom and seizure. If Eddie could only jump up and grab the wing of that plane, he could fly away from this mistake. Captain called them Crazy One,

Crazy Two, Crazy Three, and Crazy Four.

Instead, he and the others were bound at the wrists and ankles. They were dumped inside a bamboo barracks. The

"We don't want to know their names," he said. "And we barracks sat on stilts above the muddy ground, and they don't want them knowing ours."

re_mained there for days, weeks, months, forced to sleep on burlap sacks stuffed with straw. A clay jug served as their Men adapt to captivity, some better than others. Mor_ton, a toilet. At night, the enemy guards would crawl under the hut skinny, chattering youth from Chicago, would fidget and listen to their conversations. As time passed, they said whenever he heard noises from outside, rubbing his chir and less and less.

mumbling, "Oh, damn, oh damn, oh damn . . ." until the others told him to shut up. Smitty, a fireman's son from They grew thin and weak. Their ribs grew visible—even Brooklyn, was quiet most of the time, but he often seemed Rabozzo, who had been a chunky kid when he enlisted. to be swal owing something, his Adam's apple loping up Their food consisted of rice bal s fil ed with salt and, once a and down; Eddie later learned he was chewing on his day, some brownish broth with grass floating in it. One tongue. Rabozzo, the young redheaded kid from Portland, night, Eddie plucked a dead hornet from the bowl. It was Oregon, kept a poker face during the waking hours, but at missing its wings. The others stopped eating.

night he often woke up screaming, "Not me! Not me!" Eddie mostly seethed. He clenched a fist and slapped it into his palm, hours on end, knuckles to skin, like the anx_ious basebal player he had been in his youth. At night, he THEIR CAPTORS SEEMED unsure of what to do with dreamed he was back at the pier, on the Derby Horse them. In the evenings, they would enter with bayonets and carousel, where five customers raced in circles until the bel wiggle their blades at the Americans' noses, yel ing in a rang. He was racing his buddies, or his brother, or foreign language, waiting for answers. It was never Mar_guerite. But then the dream turned, and the four productive.

Crazies were on the adjacent ponies, poking at him, sneering.

There were only four of them, near as Eddie could tel and the Captain guessed that they, too, had drifted away from a Years of waiting at the pier—for a ride to finish, for the larger unit and were, as often

happens in real war making it waves to pul back, for his father to speak to him—had up day by day. Their faces were gaunt and bony with dark trained Eddie in the art of patience. But he wanted out, and nubs of hair. One looked too young to be a soldier. Another he wanted revenge. He ground his jaws and he slapped his had the most crooked teeth Eddie had ever seen. The palm and he thought about al the fights he'd been in back in his old neighborhood, the time he'd sent two kids to the sixteen days with her. ..."

hospital with a garbage can lid. He pictured what he'd do to these guards if they didn't have guns.

Then, during the fourth month, something happened. Rabozzo developed an ugly skin rash and severe diarrhea. Then one morning, the prisoners were awakened by He couldn't eat a thing. At night, he sweated through his screaming and flashing bayonets and the four Crazies had filthy clothes until they were soaking wet. He soiled them up and bound and led down into a shaft. There was no himself.

There were no clean clothes to give him so he slept light. The ground was cold. There were picks and shovels naked on the burlap, and the Captain placed his sack over and metal buckets.

him like a blanket.

"It's a goddamn coal mine," Morton said. The next day, down in the mine, Rabozzo could barely stand. The four Crazies showed no pity. When he slowed, they poked him with sticks to keep him scraping.

"Leave him be," Eddie growled.

FROM THAT DAY forward, Eddie and the others were forced to strip coal from the wal s to help the enemy's war Crazy Two, the most brutal of their captors, slammed Eddie effort. Some shoveled, some scraped, some carried pieces with a bayonet butt. He went down, a shot of pain spreading of slate and built triangles to hold up the ceiling. There were between his shoulder blades. Rabozzo scraped a few more other prisoners there, too, foreigners who didn't know pieces of coal, then col apsed. Crazy Two screamed at him English and who looked at Eddie with hol ow eyes. to get up.

Speak_ing was prohibited. One cup of water was given every few hours. The prisoners' faces, by the end of the day,

"He's sick!" Eddie yel ed, struggling to his feet. were hopelessly black, and their necks and shoulders throbbed from leaning over.

Crazy Two slammed him down again.

For the first few months of this captivity, Eddie went to

"Shut up, Eddie," Morton whispered. "For your own good." sleep with Marguerite's picture in his helmet propped up in front of him. He wasn't much for praying, but he prayed just Crazy Two leaned over Rabozzo. He pul ed back his the same, making up the words and keeping count each eyelids. Rabozzo moaned. Crazy Two made an exaggerated night, saying, "Lord, I'll give you these six days if you give smile and cooed, as if dealing with a baby. He went, "Ahh," me six days with her.... I'll give you these nine days if I get and laughed. He laughed looking at al of them, making eye nine days with her....

I'll give you these sixteen days if I get con_tact, making sure they were watching him. Then he pul ed out his pistol, rammed it into Rabozzo's ear, and shot

"The oil's for burning the evidence," the Captain him in the head.

whis_pered. "They're digging our graves." Eddie felt his body rip in half. His eyes blurred and his brain went numb. The echo of the gunshot hung in the mine as Rabozzo's face soaked into a spreading puddle of blood. Morton put his hands over his mouth. The Captain looked THREE WEEKS LATER, under a hazy-mooned sky, Crazy down. Nobody moved.

Three was inside the barracks, standing guard. He had two large rocks, almost the size of bricks, which, in his Crazy Two kicked black dirt over the body, then glared at boredom, he tried to juggle. He kept dropping them, picking Eddie and spat at his feet. He yel ed something at Crazy them up, tossing them high, and dropping them again. Three and Crazy Four, both of whom seemed as stunned as Eddie, covered in black ash, looked up, annoyed at the the prisoners. For a moment, Crazy Three shook his head thudding noise. He'd been trying to sleep. But now he lifted and mumbled, as if saying a prayer, his eyelids lowered and himself slowly. His vision cleared. He felt his nerves his lips moving furiously. But Crazy Two waved the gun pricking to life.

and yel ed again and Crazy Three and Crazy Four slowly lifted Rabozzo's body by its feet and dragged it along the

"Captain . . ." he whispered. "You ready to move?" mine floor, leaving a trail of wet blood, which, in the dark_ness, looked like spilt oil. They dropped him against a The Captain raised his head. "What're you

thinking?" wal , next to a pickax.

"Them rocks." Eddie nodded toward the guard. After that, Eddie stopped praying. He stopped count_ing days. He and the Captain spoke only of escaping before

"What about 'em?" the Captain said.

they al met the same fate. The Captain figured the enemy war effort was desperate, that was why they needed every

"I can juggle," Eddie whispered.

half-dead prisoner to scrape coal. Each day in the mine there were fewer and fewer bodies. At night, Eddie heard The Captain squinted. "What?"

bomb_ing; it seemed to be getting closer. If things got too bad, the Captain figured, their captors would bail out, But Eddie was already yel ing at the guard, "Hey! Yo!

destroy every_thing. He had seen ditches dug beyond the You're doing it wrong!"

prisoner bar_racks and large oil barrels positioned up the steep hil .

He made a circular motion with his palms. "This way! You do it this way! Gimme!"

Crazy Three opened the bamboo door and did what Eddie'd He held out his hands. "I can juggle. Gimme." hoped he would do: He yel ed for the others. Crazy One appeared with a fat rock and Crazy Two fol owed him in. Crazy Three looked at him cautiously. Of al the guards, Crazy Three thrust the rock at Eddie and yel ed some_thing. Eddie felt, he had his best chance with this one. Crazy Then he stepped back, grinned at the others, and mo_tioned Three had occasional y sneaked the prisoners pieces of for them to sit, as if to say, "Watch this." bread and tossed them through the smal hut hole that served as a win_dow. Eddie made the circular motion again Eddie tossed the rocks into a rhythmic weave. Each one was and smiled. Crazy Three approached, stopped, went back as big as his palm.

He sang a carnival tune. "Da, da-da-da for his bayo_net, then walked the two rocks over to Eddie. daaaaa ..." The guards laughed. Eddie laughed. The Captain laughed. Forced laughter, buying time.

"Like this," Eddie said, and he began to juggle effortlessly. He had learned when he was seven years old, from an

"Get closer" Eddie sang, pretending the words were part of Italian sideshow man who juggled six plates at once. Eddie the melody. Morton and Smitty slid gently in, feigning had spent countless hours practicing on the

interest.

boardwalk—pebbles, rubber balls, whatever he could find. It was no big deal. Most pier kids could juggle. The guards were enjoying the diversion. Their posture slackened. Eddie tried to swallow his breathing. Just a little But now he worked the two rocks furiously, juggling them longer. He threw one rock high into the air, then juggled the faster, impressing the guard. Then he stopped, held the lower two, then caught the third, then did it again. rocks out, and said, "Get me another one."

'Ahhh," Crazy Three said, despite himself. Crazy Three grunted.

"You like that?" Eddie said. He was juggling faster now. He

"Three rocks, see?" Eddie held up three fingers. "Three." kept tossing one rock high and watching his captors' eyes as they followed it into the air. He sang, "Da, da-da-da By now, Morton and Smitty were sitting up. The Captain daaa," then, "When I count to three," then, "Da, da-da-da was moving closer.

daaaa..." then, "Captain, the guy on the leffft..."

"Where are we going here?" Smitty mumbled. Crazy Two frowned suspiciously, but Eddie smiled the way the jugglers back at Ruby Pier smiled when they were

"If I can get one more rock . . ." Eddie mumbled back. losing the audience. "Lookie here, lookie here, lookie here!" Eddie cooed. "Greatest show on earth, buddy boy!" Eddie went faster, then counted,

"One . . . two . . ." then tossed a rock much higher than before. The Crazies watched it rise.

THE PRISONERS, THIN and barefoot and covered in blood, were running now for the steep hill. Eddie had

"Now!" Eddie yelled. In mid-juggle he grabbed a rock and, expected

gun_fire, more guards to fight, but there was no like the good baseball pitcher he had always been, whipped one. The other huts were empty. In fact, the entire camp it hard into the face of Crazy Two, breaking his nose. Eddie was empty. Eddie wondered how long it had been just the caught the second rock and threw it, left-handed, square four Crazies and them.

into the chin of Crazy One, who fel back as the Captain jumped him, grabbing his bayonet. Crazy Three,

"The rest probably took off when they heard the bombing," momentarily frozen, reached for his pistol and fired wildly the Captain whispered. "We're the last group left." as Morton and Smitty tackled his legs. The door burst open and Crazy Four ran in, and Eddie threw the last rock at him The oil barrels were pitched at the first rise of the hil . Less and missed his head by inches, but as he ducked, the than 100 yards away was the entrance to the coal mine. Captain was waiting against the wal with the bayonet, There was a supply hut nearby and Morton made sure it was which he drove through Crazy Four's rib cage so hard the empty, then ran inside; he emerged with an armful of two of them tumbled through the door. Eddie, powered by grenades, rifles, and two primitive-looking flamethrowers. adrenaline, leaped on Crazy Two and pounded his face

"Let's burn it down," he said.

harder than he had ever pounded anyone back on Pitkin Avenue. He grabbed a loose rock and slammed it against his skul , again and again, until he looked at his hands and saw a hideous purplish goo that he realized was blood and skin and coal ash, mixed together— then he heard a gunshot and grabbed his head, smearing the goo on his temples. He looked up and saw Smitty standing over him,

holding an enemy pistol. Crazy Two's body went slack. He was Today Is Eddie's Birthday

bleeding from the chest.

The cake reads "Good luck! Fight hard!" and on the side,

"For Rabozzo," Smitty mumbled.

along the vanil a-frosted edge, someone has added the words, "Come home soon," in blue squiggly letters, but the Within minutes, al four guards were dead.

"o-o-n" is squeezed together, so it reads more like "son" or

"Come home son."

Eddie's mother has already cleaned and pressed the clothes. She laughs. "You haven't opened it yet," he will wear the next day. She's hung them on a hanger on his bedroom closet doorknob and put his one pair of dress

"Listen." He moves closer. "Do you—" shoes beneath them.

"Eddie!" someone yells from the other room. "Come on and Eddie is in the kitchen, fooling with his young Romanian, blow out the candles."

cousins, his hands behind his back as they try to punch his stomach. One points out the kitchen window at the Parisian

"Yeah! Were hungry!"

Carousel, which is lit for the evening customers.

"Oh, Sal, shush!"

"Horses!" the child exclaims.

"Well, we are."

The front door opens and Eddie hears a voice that makes his heart jump, even now. He wonders if this is a weakness. There is cake and beer and milk and cigars and a toast to shouldn't be taking off to war.

Eddie's success, and there is a moment where his mother begins to cry and she hugs her other son, Joe, who is staying

"Hiya, Eddie," Marguerite says.

stateside on account of his flat feet.

And there she is, in the kitchen doorway, looking wonderful. Later that night, Eddie walks Marguerite along the and Eddie feels that familiar tickle in his chest. She brushes promenade. He knows the names of every ticket taker and a bit of rainwater from her hair and smiles. She has a food vendor and they all wish him luck. Some of the older small box in her hands.

women get teary-eyed, and Eddie figures they have sons of their own, already gone.

"I brought you something. For your birthday, and, wel ... for your leaving, too."

He and Marguerite buy saltwater taffy, molasses and teaberry and root beer flavors. They pick out pieces from She smiles again. Eddie wants to hug her so badly, he thinks the smal white bag, play_ful y fighting each other s fingers. he'l burst. He doesn't care what is in the box. He only wants At the penny arcade, Eddie pul s on a plaster hand and the to remember her holding it out for him. As always, with arrow goes past "clammy" and "harmless" and "mild, "al Marguerite, Ed_die mostly wants to freeze time. the way to "hot stuff."

"This is swel ," he says.

"You 're real y strong," Marguerite says.

"Hot stuff," Eddie says, making a muscle. A FREED SOLDIER is often furious. The days and nights At the end of the night, they stand on the boardwalk in a he lost, the torture and humiliation he suffered

—it al fash_ion they have seen in the movies, holding hands, demands a fierce revenge, a balancing of the accounts. leaning against the railing. Out on the sand, an old ragpicker has built a smal fire from sticks and torn towels So when Morton, his arms ful of stolen weapons, said to and is huddling by it, settled in for the night. the others, "Let's burn it down," there was quick if not logical agreement.

Inflated by their new sense of control,

"You don't have to ask me to wait, "Marguerite says the men scattered with the enemy's firepower, Smitty to the suddenly.

entrance of the mine shaft, Morton and Eddie to the oil barrels. The Captain went in search of a transport vehicle. Eddie swal ows.

"Five minutes, then back here!" he barked. "That

"I don't?"

bombing's gonna start soon and we need to be gone. Got it?

Five minutes!"

She shakes her head. Eddie smiles. Saved from a question that has caught in his throat al night, he feels as if a string Which was al it took to destroy what had been their home has just shot from his heart

and looped around her for nearly half a year. Smitty dropped the grenades down shoulders, pulling her close, making her his. He loves her the mine shaft and ran. Eddie and Morton rolled two barrels more in this moment than he thought he could ever love into the hut complex, pried them open, then, one by one, anyone.

fired the nozzles of their newly acquired flamethrowers and watched the huts ignite.

A drop of rain hits Eddie's forehead. Then another. He looks up at the gathering clouds.

"Burn!" Morton yelled.

"Hey, Hot Stuff?" Marguerite says. She smiles but then her

"Burn!" Eddie yelled.

face droops and she blinks back water, although Eddie cannot tell if it is raindrops or tears.

The mine shaft exploded from below. Black smoke rose from the entrance. Smitty, his work done, ran toward the

"Don't get killed, OK?" she says.

meeting point. Morton kicked his oil barrel into a hut and unleashed a rope-like burst of flame.

Eddie watched, sneered, then moved down the path to the splashing sparks and flame. Eddie jumped back. His eyes flared. It was larger, more like a barn, and he lifted his head. Maybe it was a shadow.

weapon. This was over, he said to himself. Over. All these weeks and months in the hands of those bastards, those

"EDDIE! NOW!"

subhuman guards with their bad teeth and bony faces and the dead hornets in their soup. He didn't know what would Morton was up the path, waving for Eddie to come. Eddie's heart leapt to them next, but it could not be any worse than eyes were stinging. He was breathing hard. He pointed and what they had endured.

yelled, "I think there's someone in there!" Eddie squeezed the trigger. Whoosh. The fire shot up Morton put a hand to his ear. "What?" quickly. The bamboo was dry, and within a minute the walls of the

barn were melting in orange and yellow flames.

"Someone ... in ... there!"

Off in the distance, Eddie heard the rumble of an engine—the Captain, he hoped, had found something to Morton shook his head. He couldn't hear. Eddie turned and escape in—and then, suddenly, from the skies, the first was almost certain he saw it again, there, crawling inside sounds of bombing, the noise they had been hearing every the burning barn, a child-size figure. It had been more than night. It was even closer now, and Eddie realized whoever it two years since Eddie had seen anything besides grown was would see the flames. They might be rescued. He might men, and the shadowy shape

made him think suddenly of be going home! He turned to the burning barn and ... his small cousins back at the pier and the Little Folks Miniature Railway he used to run and the roller coasters and What was that?

the kids on the beach and Marguerite and her picture and all that he'd shut from his mind for so many months. He blinked.

What was that?

Something darted across the door opening. Eddie tried to

"HEY! COME OUT!" he yelled, dropping the focus. The heat was intense, and he shielded his eyes with flamethrower, moving even closer. "I WON'T SHOO-" his free hand. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd just seen a small figure running inside the fire.

A hand grabbed his shoulder, yanking him backward. Eddie spun, his fist clenched. It was Morton, yelling, "EDDIE!"

"Hey!" Eddie yelled, stepping forward, lowering his We gotta go NOW!" Eddie shook his head.

weapon. "HEY!" The roof of the barn began to crumble,

"No—no—wait—wait—wait, I think there's someone in there—"

"There's nobody in there! NOW!"

"I'LL HELP YOU! COME OUT! I WON'T SHOO-" Eddie was desperate. He turned back to the barn. Morton A piercing pain ripped through Eddie's leg. He screamed a grabbed him again. This time Eddie spun

around and swung long, hard curse then crumbled to the ground. Blood was wildly, hitting him in the chest. Morton fell to his knees. spewing below his knee. Plane engines roared. The skies lit Eddie's head was pounding. His face twisted in anger. He in bluish flashes.

turned again to the flames, his eyes nearly shut. There. Was that it? Rolling behind a wall? There?

He lay there, bleeding and burning, his eyes shut against the searing heat, and for the first time in his life, he felt ready to die. He stepped forward, convinced something innocent was dying. Then someone yanked him backward, rolling him in the being burned to death in front of him. Then the rest of the dirt, extinguishing the flames, and he was too stunned and roof collapsed with a roar, casting sparks like electric dust weak to resist, he rolled like a sack of beans. Soon he was that rained down on his head.

inside a transport vehicle and the others were around him, telling him to hang on, hang on. His back was burned and in that instant, the whole of the war came surging out of his knee had gone numb and he was getting dizzy and tired, him like bile. He was sickened by the captivity and so very tired.

sickened by the murders, sickened by the blood and goo drying on his temples, sickened by the bombing and the burning and the futility of it all. At that moment he just wanted to salvage something, a piece of Rabozzo, a piece of himself, something, and he staggered into the flaming THE CAPTAIN NODDED slowly, as he recalled those last wreckage, madly convinced that there was a soul inside

moments.

every black shadow. Planes roared overhead and shots from their guns rang out in drumbeats.

"You remember anything about how you got out of there?" he asked.

Eddie moved as if in a trance. He stepped past a burning puddle of oil, and his clothes caught fire from behind. A

"Not really," Eddie said.

yellow flame moved up his calf and thigh. He raised his arms and holered.

"It took two days. You were in and out of consciousness. You lost a

lot of blood."

"We made it though," Eddie said.

"Before I entered the service, all I did was take orders. Next thing I knew, I was giving them.

"Yeaah." The Captain drew the word out and punctuated it with a sigh. "That bullet got you pretty good."

"Peacetime was one thing. Got a lot of wise-guy recruits. But then the war started and the new men flooded in. In truth, the bullet had never been fully removed. It had cut in—young men, like you—and they were all saluting me, through several nerves and tendons and shattered against a wanting me to tell them what to do. I could see the fear in bone, fracturing it vertically. Eddie had two surgeries. Their eyes.

They acted as if I knew something about war that neither cured the problem. The doctors said he'd been left was classified. They thought I could keep them alive, you with a limp, one likely to get worse with age as the did, too, didn't you?"

misshapen bones deteriorated. "The best we can do," he was told. Was it? Who could say? All Eddie knew was that he'd had to admit he did.

awoken in a medical unit and his life was never the same. His running was over. His dancing was over. Worse, for The Captain reached back and rubbed his neck. "I couldn't, some reason, the way he used to feel about things was over, of course. I took my orders, too. But if I couldn't keep you too. He withdrew. Things seemed silly or pointless. War alive, I thought I could at least keep you together. In the had crawled inside of Eddie, in his leg and in his soul. He middle of a big war, you go looking for a small idea to learn many things as a soldier. He came home a different belief in. When you find one, you hold it the way a man.

soldier holds his crucifix when he's praying in a foxhole.

"For me, that little idea was what I told you guys every day. No one gets left behind."

"DID YOU KNOW," the Captain said, "that I come from Eddie nodded. "That meant a lot," he said. three generations of military?"

The Captain looked straight at him. "I hope so," he said. Eddie

shrugged.

He reached inside his breast pocket, took out another

"Yep. I knew how to fire a pistol when I was six. In the cigarette, and lit up.

mornings, my father would inspect my bed, actual y bounce a quarter on the sheets. At the dinner table it was always,

"Why do you say that?" Eddie asked.

'Yes, sir,' and, 'No, sir.'

The Captain blew smoke, then motioned with the end of the cigarette toward Eddie's leg.

"Because," he said calmly, his elbow across Eddie's chest,

"Because I was the one," he said, "who shot you."

"we would have lost you in that fire. You would have died. And it wasn't your time."

Eddie panted hard. "My . . . time?"

EDDIE LOOKED AT his leg, dangling over the tree The Captain continued. "You were obsessed with get_ting branch. The surgery scars were back. So was the pain. He in there. You damn near knocked Morton out when he tried felt a wel ing of something inside him that he had not felt to stop you. We had a minute to get out and, damn your since before he died, in truth, that he had not felt in many strength, you were too tough to fight."

years: a fierce, surging flood of anger, and a desire to hurt something. His eyes narrowed and he stared at the Captain, Eddie felt a final surge of rage and grabbed the Captain by who stared back blankly, as if he knew what was coming. the col ar. He pul ed him close. He saw the teeth stained He let the cigarette fal from his fingers.

yel ow by tobacco. "My . . . leggggg!" Eddie seethed. "My life!"

"Go ahead," he whispered.

"I took your leg," the Captain said, quietly, "to save your Eddie screamed and lunged with a windmil swing, and the life."

two men fel off the tree branch and tumbled through limbs and vines, wrestling and fal ing al the way down. Eddie let go and fel back exhausted. His arms ached. His head was spinning. For so many years, he had been haunted by that one moment, that one mistake, when his whole life changed.

"WHY? YOU BASTARD! You bastard! Not you! WHY?"

"There was nobody in that hut. What was I thinking? If They were grappling now on the muddy earth. Eddie only I didn't go in there . . ." His voice dropped to a strad_dled the Captain's chest, pummeling him with blows whis_per. "Why didn't I just die?"

to the face. The Captain did not bleed. Eddie shook him by the col ar and banged his skul against the mud. The Captain

"No one gets left behind, remember?" the Captain said. did not blink. Instead, he rol ed from side to side with each

"What happened to you—I've seen it happen before. A punch, al owing Eddie his rage. Final y, with one arm, he sol_dier reaches a certain point and then he can't go grabbed Eddie and flipped him over.

anymore. Sometimes it's in the middle of the night. A man'l just rol out of his tent and start walking, barefoot, half

"It's like I told you," the Captain said. "Tetanus? Yel_low naked, like he's going home, like he lives just around the fever? Al those shots? Just a big waste of my time." corner.

He nodded in a direction over Eddie's shoulder, and Eddie

"Sometimes it's in the middle of a fight. Man'l drop his turned to look. gun, and his eyes go blank. He's just done. Can't fight anymore. Usual y he gets shot.

"Your case, it just so happened, you snapped in front of a fire about a minute before we were done with this place. I WHAT HE SAW, suddenly, was no longer the barren hil s couldn't let you burn alive. I figured a leg wound would but the night of their escape, the hazy moon in the sky, the heal. We pul ed you out of there, and the others got you to a planes coming in, the huts on fire. The Captain was medical unit."

driv_ing the transport with Smitty, Morton, and Eddie inside. Eddie

was across the backseat, burned, wounded, Eddie's breathing smacked like a hammer in his chest. His semiconscious, as Morton tied a tourniquet above his knee. head was smeared with mud and leaves. It took him a The shel ing was getting closer. The black sky lit up every minute to realize the last thing the Captain had said. "The few seconds, as if the sun were flickering on and off. The others?" Eddie said. "What do you mean, 'the others'?" trans_port swerved as it reached the top of a hil , then stopped.

The Captain rose. He brushed a twig from his leg. There was a gate, a makeshift thing of wood and wire, but

"Did you ever see me again?" he asked. because the ground dropped off sharply on both sides, they could not go around it. The Captain grabbed a rifle and Eddie had not. He had been airlifted to the military hospital, jumped out. He shot the lock and pushed the gate open. He and eventual y, because of his handicap, was dis_charged motioned for Morton to take the wheel, then pointed to his and flown home to America. He had heard, months later, eyes, signaling he would check the path ahead, which that the Captain had not made it, but he figured it was some curled into a thicket of trees. He ran, as best he could in his later combat with some other unit. A let_ter arrived bare feet, 50 yards beyond the turn in the road. eventual y, with a medal inside, but Eddie put it away, unopened. The months after the war were dark and The path was clear. He waved to his men. A plane zoomed brooding, and he forgot details and had no interest in overhead and he lifted his eyes to see whose side it was. It col_lecting them. In time, he changed his address. was at that moment, while he was looking to the heavens, that a smal click sounded beneath his right foot. Eddie looked lost.

The land mine exploded instantly, like a burping flame from the earth's core. It blew the Captain 20 feet into the air and

"I figure it's like in the Bible, the Adam and Eve deal?" the split him into pieces, one fiery lump of bone and gristle and Captain said. "Adam's first night on earth? When he lays a hundred chunks of charred flesh, some of which flew over down to sleep? He thinks it's all over, right? He doesn't the muddy earth and landed in the banyan trees. know what sleep is. His eyes are closing and he thinks he's leaving this world, right?"

"Only he isn't. He wakes up the next morning and he has a fresh new world to work with, but he has something else, too. He has his yesterday."

The Captain grinned. "The way I see it, that's what we're The Second Lesson

getting here, soldier. That's what heaven is. You get to make sense of your yesterdays."

"AW, JESUS," EDDIE SAID, CLOSING HIS EYES, dropping his head backward. 'Aw, God. Aw, God! I had no He took out his plastic cigarette pack and tapped it with his idea, sir. It's sick. It's awful!"

finger. "You fol owin' this? I was never al that hot at teaching."

The Captain nodded and looked away. The hil s had returned to their barren state, the animal bones and the Eddie watched the Captain closely. He had always thought bro_ken cart and the smoldering remains of the vil age. of him as so much older. But now, with some of the coal Eddie realized this was the Captain's burial ground. No ash rubbed from his face, Eddie noticed the scant lines on funeral.

No coffin. Just his shattered skeleton and the muddy his skin and the ful head of dark hair. He must have only earth.

been in his 30s.

"You've been waiting here al this time?" Eddie whispered.

"You been here since you died," Eddie said, "but that's twice as long as you lived."

"Time," the Captain said, "is not what you think." He sat down next to Eddie. "Dying? Not the end of every_thing. The Captain nodded.

We think it is. But what happens on earth is only the beginning."

"I've been waitin' for you."

Eddie looked down.

"I didn't die for nothing, either. That night, we might have

"That's what the Blue Man said."

al driven over that land mine. Then the four of us would have been gone."

"Wel , he was too. He was part of your life, part of why you lived and how you lived, part of the story you needed to Eddie shook his head.

"But you . . ." He lowered his voice. know, but he told you and he's beyond here now, and in a

"You lost your life."

short bit, I'm gonna be as wel . So listen up. Because here's what you need to know from me." Eddie felt his back The Captain smacked his tongue on his teeth.

straighten.

"That's the thing. Sometimes when you sacrifice some_thing precious, you're not real y losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else."

"SACRIFICE," THE CAPTAIN said. "You made one. I The Captain walked over to the helmet, rifle, and dog tags, made one. We al make them. But you were angry over the symbolic grave, stil stuck in the ground. He placed the yours. You kept thinking about what you lost.

helmet and tags under one arm, then plucked the rifle from the mud and threw it like a javelin. It never landed. Just

"You didn't get it. Sacrifice is a part of life. It's supposed to soared into the sky and disappeared. The Captain turned. be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to. Little sacrifices. Big sacrifices. A mother works so her son

"I shot you, al right," he said, "and you lost some_thing, can go to school. A daughter moves home to take care of but you gained something as wel . You just don't know it her sick father.

yet. I gained something, too."

"A man goes to war. . . ."

"What?"

He stopped for a moment and looked off into the cloudy

"I got to keep my promise. I didn't leave you behind." gray sky.

He held out his palm.

"Rabozzo didn't die for nothing, you know. He sacri_ficed for his country, and his family knew it, and his kid brother

"Forgive me about the leg?"

went on to be a good soldier and a great man because he was inspired by it.

Eddie thought for a moment. He thought about the bitterness after his wounding, his anger at all he had given. He lifted a hand and the smoldering landscape transformed. Up. Then he thought of what the Captain had given up and the rubble melted, trees grew and spread, the ground turned he felt ashamed. He offered his hand. The Captain gripped from mud to lush, green grass. The murky clouds pulled it tightly.

apart like curtains, revealing a sapphire sky. A light, white mist fell in above the treetops, and a peach-colored sun

"That's what I've been waiting for." hung brilliantly above the horizon, reflected in the sparkling oceans that now surrounded the island. It was pure. Suddenly, the thick vines dropped off the banyan branches unspoiled, untouched beauty.

and melted with a hiss into the ground. New, healthy branches emerged in a yawning spread, covered in smooth, Eddie looked up at his old commanding officer, whose face leathery leaves and pouches of figs. The Captain only was clean and whose uniform was suddenly pressed. glanced up, as if he'd been expecting it. Then, using his open palms, he wiped the remaining ash from his face.

"This," the Captain said, raising his arms, "is what I see."

"Captain?" Eddie said.

He stood for a moment, taking it in.

"Yeah?"

"By the way, I don't smoke anymore. That was all in your eyes, too." He chuckled. "Why would I smoke in heaven?"

"Why here? You can pick anywhere to wait, right? That's what the Blue Man said. So why this place?" He began to walk off.

The Captain smiled. "Because I died in battle. I was killed

"Wait," Eddie yelled. "I gotta know something. My death. in these hills. I left the world having known almost nothing. At the pier. Did I save that girl? I felt her hands, but I can't but war—war talk, war plans, a war family.

remember—"

"My wish was to see what the world looked like without a The Captain turned and Eddie swal owed his words, war. Before we started kil ing each other." embarrassed to even be asking, given the horrible way the Captain had died.

Eddie looked around. "But this is war."

"I just want to know, that's al ," he mumbled.

"To you. But our eyes are different," the Captain said.

"What you see ain't what I see."

The Captain scratched behind his ear. He looked at Eddie sympathetical y. "I can't tel you, soldier." baggy jeans. He held a newspaper. The headline read Eddie dropped his head.

'Amusement Park Tragedy.'

"But someone can."

"Hard time sleeping," Dominguez said. He tossed the helmet and tags. "Yours."

"Yeah." Wil ie slumped onto a metal stool. "Me, too." Eddie looked down. Inside the helmet flap was a crumpled He spun a half circle on the stool, looking blankly at the photo of a woman that made his heart ache al over again. paper. "When you think they'l open us up again?" When he looked up, the Captain was gone.

Dominguez shrugged. 'Ask the police.'

They sat quietly for a while, shifting their postures as if taking turns. Dominguez sighed. Wil ie reached inside his shirt pocket, fishing for a stick of gum. It was Monday. It was morning. They were waiting for the old man to come in and get the workday started.

MONDAY, 7:30 A.M.

The morning after the accident, Dominguez came to the shop early, skipping his routine of picking up a bagel and a soft drink for breakfast. The park was closed, but he came The Third Person Eddie Meets in Heaven

in anyhow, and he turned on the water at the sink. He ran his hands

under the flow, thinking he would clean some of the ride parts. Then he shut off the water and abandoned the idea. It seemed twice as quiet as it had a minute ago. A SUDDEN WIND LIFTED EDDIE, AND HE spun like a

"What's up?"

pocket watch on the end of a chain. An explosion of smoke engulfed him, swallowing his body in a flume of colors. Willie was at the shop door. He wore a green tank top and The sky seemed to pull in, until he could feel it touching his skin like a gathered blanket. Then it shot away and the lights originated. He blinked again—this time in exploded into jade. Stars appeared, millions of stars, like disbelief.

salt sprinkled across the greenish firmament.

There, in the snowy field, sitting by itself, was a boxcar Eddie blinked. He was in the mountains now, but the most shaped building with a stainless steel exterior and a red remarkable mountains, a range that went on forever, with barrel roof. A sign above it blinked the word: "EAT." snow-capped peaks, jagged rocks, and sheer purple slopes. In a flat between two crests was a large, black lake. A moon A diner.

reflected brightly in its water.

Eddie had spent many hours in places like this. They all Down the ridge, Eddie noticed a flickering of colored light looked the same—high-backed booths, shiny countertops, a that changed rhythmically, every few seconds. He stepped row of small-parted windows across the front, which, from in that direction—and realized he was ankle-deep in snow. the outside, made customers appear like riders in a railroad He lifted his foot and shook it hard. The flakes fell loose, car. Eddie could make out figures through those windows glistening with a golden sheen. When he touched them, they now, people talking and gesturing. He walked up the snowy were neither cold nor wet.

steps to the double-paned door. He peered inside. Where am I now? Eddie thought. Once again, he took stock An elderly couple was sitting to his right, eating pie; they of his body, pressing on his shoulders, his chest, his took no notice of him. Other customers sat in swivel chairs stomach. His arm muscles remained tight, but his at the marble counter or inside booths with their coats on midsection was looser, flabbier. He hesitated, then squeezed hooks. They appeared to be from different decades: Eddie his left knee. It throbbed in pain and Eddie winced. He had saw a woman with a 1930s high-colored dress and a

hoped upon leaving the Captain that the wound would long-haired young man with a 1960s peace sign tattooed on his appear. Instead, it seemed he was becoming the man his

arm. Many of the patrons appeared to have been he'd been on earth, scars and fat and all. Why would heaven wounded. A black man in a work shirt was missing an arm. make you relive your own decay?

A teenage girl had a deep gash across her face. None of them looked over when Eddie rapped on the window. He followed the flickering lights down the narrow ridge. saw cooks wearing white paper hats, and plates of steaming This landscape, stark and silent, was breathtaking, more like food on the counter awaiting serving—food in the most how he'd imagined heaven. He wondered, for a moment, if succulent colors: deep red sauces, yellow butter creams. His he had somehow finished, if the Captain had been wrong, if eyes moved along to the last booth in the right-hand corner. there were no more people to meet. He came through the He froze.

snow around a rock ledge to the large clearing from which What he saw, he could not have seen.

They pat their pockets. Mickey fishes a pack from his jacket, dropping two loose cigarettes on the floor. Eddie's mother lights the candles. An elevator pings down the hall. A gurney emerges.

"NO," HE HEARD himself whisper. He turned back from

'All right then, let's go, "she says.

the door. He drew deep breaths. His heart pounded. He spun around and looked again, then banged wildly on the The small flames wiggle as they move together. The group windowpanes.

enters Eddie's room singing softly. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to—"

"No!" Eddie yelled. "No! No!" He banged until he was sure the glass would break. "No!" He kept yelling until the word The soldier in the next bed wakes up yelling, "WHAT THE

he wanted, a word he hadn't spoken in decades, finally HELL?" He realizes where he is and drops back down, formed in his throat. He screamed that word then—he embarrassed. The song, once interrupted, seems too heavy screamed it so loudly that his head throbbed. But the figure to lift again, and only Eddie's mother's voice,

shaking in its inside the booth remained hunched over, oblivious, one solitude, is able to continue.

hand resting on the table, the other holding a cigar, never looking up, no matter how many times Eddie howled it,

"Happy birthday dear Ed-die..." then quickly, "happybirthover and over again: "Dad! Dad! Dad!" day to you."

Eddie props himself against a pillow. His burns are bandaged. His leg is in a long cast. There is a pair of crutches by the bed. He looks at these faces and he is Today Is Eddie's Birthday

consumed by a desire to run away.

In the dim and sterile hallway of the V.A. hospital, Eddie's Joe clears his throat. "Well, hey, you look, pretty good," he mother opens the white bakery box and rearranges the says. The others quickly agree.

Good. Yes. Very good. candles on the cake, making them even, 12 on one side, 12

on the other. The rest of them—Eddie's father, Joe,

"Your mom got a cake, "Marguerite whispers. Marguerite, Mickey Shea—stand around her, watching. Eddie's mother steps forward, as if it's her turn. She

"Does anyone have a match?"she whispers. presents the cardboard box.

Eddie mumbles, "Thanks, Ma."

On Saturdays, Eddie's father took him to the pier. Ed_die She looks around. "Now where should we put this?" would leave the apartment with visions of carousels and globs of cotton candy, but after an hour or so, his father Mickey grabs a chair. Joe clears a small tabletop. would find a familiar face and say, "Watch the kid for me, Marguerite moves Eddie's crutches. Only his father does will ya?" Until his father returned, usually late in the not shuffle for the sake of shuffling. He stands against the afternoon, often drunk, Eddie stayed in the custody of an back wall, a jacket over his arm, staring at Eddie's leg, acrobat or an animal trainer.

encased in plaster from thigh to ankle.

Still, for countless hours of his boardwalk youth, Ed die Eddie catches his eye. His father looks down and runs his waited for his father's attention, sitting on railings or hand over the windowsil . Eddie tightens every muscle in squatting in his short pants atop tool chests in the repair his body and attempts, by sheer wil , to force the tears back shop. Often he'd say, "I can help, I can help!" but the only into their ducts.

job entrusted him was crawling beneath the Ferris wheel in the morning, before the park opened, to col ect the coins that had fal en from customers' pockets the night before. At least four evenings a week, his father played cards. The table had money, bottles., cigarettes, and rules. Eddie's rule was simple: Do not disturb. Once he tried to stand next to his father and look at his cards, but the old man put down ALL PARENTS DAMAGE their children. It cannot be his cigar and erupted like thunder, smacking Ed die's face helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorbs the prints of its with the back of his hand.

"Stop breathing on me," he said. handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter Eddie burst into tears and his mother pul ed him to her childhoods completely into jagged little pieces, beyond waist, glaring at her husband. Eddie never got that close repair.

again.

The damage done by Eddie's father was, at the begin ning, Other nights, when the cards went bad and the bottles had the damage of neglect. As an infant, Eddie was rarely held been emptied and his mother was already asleep, his father by the man, and as a child, he was mostly grabbed by the brought his thunder into Eddie and Joe's bedroom. He raked arm, less with love than with annoyance.

Eddie's mother through the meager toys, hurling them against the wal . handed out the tenderness; his father was there for the Then he made his sons lie facedown on the mattress while dis_cipline.

he pul ed off his belt and lashed their rear ends, screaming that they were wasting his money on junk. Eddie used to Eddie would say he got him good. This, too, met with his pray for his mother to wake up, but even the times she did, father's approval. When Eddie attacked the kids who were his father warned her to "stay out of it." Seeing her in the bothering his brother—"the hoodlums," his mother cal ed hal way, clutching her robe, as helpless as he was, made it them—Joe was ashamed and hid in his room, but Eddie's al even worse.

father said, "Never mind him. You're the strong one. Be your brother's keeper. Don't let nobody touch him." The hands on Eddie's childhood glass then were hard and caloused and red with anger, and he went through his When Eddie started junior high, he mimicked his father's younger years whacked, lashed, and beaten. This was the summer schedule, rising before the sun, working at the park second damage done, the one after neglect. The damage of until nightfall. At first, he ran the simpler rides, violence. It got so that Eddie could tell by the thump of the maneuvering the brake levers, bringing train cars to a footsteps coming down the hall how hard he was going to gently stop. In later years, he worked in the repair shop. get it.

Eddie's father would test him with maintenance problems. He'd hand him a broken steering wheel and say, "Fix it." Through it all, despite it all, Eddie privately adored his old He'd point out a tangled chain and say, "Fix it." He'd carry man, because sons will adore their fathers through even the over a rusty fender and some sandpaper and say, "Fix it." worst behavior. It is how they learn devotion. Before he can And every time, upon completion of the task, Eddie would devote himself to God or a woman, a boy will devote walk the item back to his father and say, "It's fixed." himself to his father, even foolishly, even beyond explanation.

At night they would gather at the dinner table, his mother plump and sweating, cooking by the stove, his brother, Joe, talking away, his hair and skin smelling from seawater. Joe had become a good swimmer, and his summer work was at the Ruby Pier pool. Joe talked about all the people he saw AND ON OCCASION, as if to feed the weakest embers of there, their swimsuits, their money. Eddie's father was not a fire, Eddie's father let a wrinkle of pride crack the veneer impressed. Once Eddie overheard him talking to his mother of his disinterest. At the baseball field by the 14th Avenue about Joe.

"That one," he said, "ain't tough enough for schoolyard, his father stood behind the fence, watching anything but water."

Eddie play. If Eddie smacked the ball to the outfield, his father nodded, and when he did, Eddie leaped around the still, Eddie envied the way his brother looked in the bases. Other times, when Eddie came home from an all day evenings, so tanned and clean. Eddie's fingernails, like his fight, his father would notice his scraped knuckles or split father's, were stained with grease, and at the dinner table lip.

He would ask, "What happened to the other guy?" and Eddie would flick them with his thumbnail, trying to get the dirt out. He caught his

father watching him once and the old man grinned.

Eddie stirred. His father yelled again.

"Shows you did a hard day's work," he said, and he held up

"Get up ... and get a job!"

his own dirty fingernails, before wrapping them around a glass of beer.

The old man was wobbling, but he came toward Eddie and pushed him. "Get up and get a job! Get up and get a job!"

By this point—already a strapping teenager—Eddie only Get up ... and ... GET A JOB!"

nodded back. Unbeknownst to him, he had begun the ritual of semaphore with his father, forsaking words or physical Eddie rose to his elbows.

affection. It was all to be done internally. "You were just supposed to know it, that's all. Denial of affection. The

"Get up and get a job! Get up and—"

damage done.

"ENOUGH!" Eddie yelled, surging to his feet, ignoring the burst of pain in his knee. He glared at his father, his face just inches away. He could smell the bad breath of alcohol and cigarettes.

AND THEN, ONE night, the speaking stopped altogether. This was after the war, when Eddie had been released. The old man glanced at Eddie's leg. His voice lowered to a from the hospital and the cast had been removed from his growl. "See? You . . . ain't... so ... hurt." leg and he had moved back into the family apartment on Beachwood Avenue. His father had been drinking at the He reeled back to throw a punch, but Eddie moved on nearby pub and he came home late to find Eddie asleep on instinct and grabbed his father's arm mid-swing. The old the couch. The darkness of combat had left Eddie changed. man's eyes widened. This was the first time Eddie had ever He stayed indoors. He rarely spoke, even to Marguerite. He defended himself, the first time he had ever done anything spent hours staring out the kitchen window, watching the besides receive a beating as if he deserved it. His father carousel ride, rubbing his bad knee. His mother whispered

looked at his own clenched fist, short of its mark, and his that he "just needed time," but his father grew more agitated nostrils flared and his teeth gritted and he staggered each day. He didn't understand depression. To him it was back_ward and yanked his arm free. He stared at Eddie with weakness.

the eyes of a man watching a train pul away.,

"Get up," he yel ed now, his words slurring, "and get a He never spoke to his son again.

job."

This was the final handprint on Eddie's glass. Silence. It stitched with white beads and topped with a velvet bow just haunted their remaining years. His father was silent when below her neck. Her skirt had a rhinestone buckle and there Ed_die moved into his own apartment, silent when Eddie were snaps and hooks up the side. She stood with el_egant took a cab-driving job, silent at Eddie's wedding, silent posture, holding a parasol with both hands. Eddie guessed when Eddie came to visit his mother. She begged and wept she'd been rich.

and beseeched her husband to change his mind, to let it go, but Eddie's fa_ther would only say to her, through a

"Not always rich," she said, grinning as if she'd heard him. clenched jaw, what he said to others who made the same

"I was raised much like you were, in the back end of the request: "That boy raised a hand to me." And that was the city, forced to leave school when I was fourteen. I was a end of the conversation.

working girl. So were my sisters. We gave every nickel back to the family—"

Al parents damage their children. This was their life together. Neglect. Violence. Silence. And now, someplace Eddie interrupted. He didn't want another story. "Why can't beyond death, Eddie slumped against a stainless steel wal my father hear me?" he demanded.

and dropped into a snowbank, stung again by the denial of a man whose love, almost inexplicably, he stil coveted, a She smiled. "Because his spirit—safe and sound—is part of man ignoring him, even in heaven. His father. The damage my eternity. But he is not real y here. You are." done.

"Why does my father have to be safe for you?" She paused.

"DON'T BE ANGRY," a woman's voice said. "He can't

"Come," she said.

hear you."

Eddie jerked his head up. An old woman stood before him in the snow. Her face was gaunt, with sagging cheeks, rosecolored lipstick, and tightly pulled-back white hair, thin SUDDENLY THEY WERE at the bottom of the mountain. enough in parts to reveal the pink scalp beneath it. She wore The light from the diner was now just a speck, like a star wire-rimmed spectacles over narrow blue eyes.

that had fallen into a crevice.

Eddie could not recall her. Her clothes were before his time,

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the old woman said. Eddie followed a dress made of silk and chiffon, with a bib-like bodice her eyes. There was something about her, as if he'd seen her photograph somewhere.

She squinted. "Back?"

"Are you ... my third person?"

"Yeah, back," Eddie said. "To my life. To that last day. Is there something I can do? Can I promise to be good? Can I

"I am at that," she said.

promise to go to church at the time? Something?" Eddie rubbed his head. Who was this woman? At least with

"Why?" She seemed amused.

the Blue Man, at least with the Captain, he had some recollection of their place in his life. Why a stranger? Why

"Why?" Eddie repeated. He swiped at the snow that had no now? Eddie had once hoped death would mean a reunion cold, with the bare hand that felt no moisture. "Why?

with those who went before him. He had attended so many Because this place doesn't make no sense to me. Because I funerals, polishing his black dress shoes, finding his hat, don't feel like no angel, if that's

what I'm supposed to feel standing in a cemetery with the same despairing question: like. Because I don't feel like I got it al figured out. I can't Why are they gone and I'm stil here? His mother. His even remember my own death. I can't remember the brother. His aunts and uncles. His buddy Noel. Marguerite. accident. Al I remember are these two little hands—this

"One day," the priest would say, "we wil al be together in lit_tle girl I was trying to save, see? I was pul ing her out of the Kingdom of Heaven."

the way and I must've grabbed her hands and that's when I

..."

Where were they, then, if this was heaven? Eddie stud_ied this strange older woman. He felt more alone than ever. He shrugged.

"Can I see Earth?" he whispered.

"Died?" the old woman said, smiling. "Passed away?

Moved on? Met your Maker?"

She shook her head no.

"Died," he said, exhaling. "And that's al I remember. Then

"Can I talk to God?"

you, the others, al this. Ain't you supposed to have peace when you die?"

"You can always do that."

"You have peace," the old woman said, "when you make it He hesitated before asking the next question.

with yourself."

"Can I go back?"

"Nah," Eddie said, shaking his head. "Nah, you don't." He thought about tel ing her the agitation he'd felt every day since the war, the bad dreams, the inability to get excited greasy spoon, they cal ed it.

They'd torn it down years ago. about much of anything, the times he

went to the docks alone and watched the fish pulled in by the wide rope nets,

"You?" Eddie said, almost laughing. "You were a waitress embarrassed because he saw himself in those helpless, at the Seahorse?"

flopping creatures, snared and beyond escape.

"Indeed," she said, proudly. "I served dockworkers their He didn't tell her that. Instead he said, "No offense, lady, coffee and longshoremen their crab cakes and bacon. but I don't even know you."

"I was an attractive girl in those years, I might add. I turned

"But I know you," she said.

away many a proposal. My sisters would scold me. 'Who are you to be so choosy?' they would say. 'Find a man before Eddie sighed.

it's too late.'

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"Then one morning, the finest-looking gentleman I had ever seen walked through the door. He wore a chalk-stripe suit

"Well," she said, "if you have a moment." and a derby hat. His dark hair was neatly cut and his mustache covered a constant smile. He nodded when I served him and I tried not to stare. But when he spoke with his colleague, I could hear his heavy, confident laughter. Twice I caught him looking in my direction. When he paid SHE SAT DOWN then, although there was nothing to sit his bill, he said his name was Emile and he asked if he on. She simply rested on the air and crossed her legs, might call on me. And I knew, right then, my sisters would lady-like, keeping her spine straight. The long skirt folded no longer have to hound me for a decision.

neatly around her. A breeze blew, and Eddie caught the faint scent of perfume.

"Our courtship was exhilarating, for Emile was a man of means. He took me places I had never been, bought me

'As I mentioned, I was once a working girl. My job was clothes I had never imagined, paid for meals I had never serving food in a place called the Seahorse Grille. It was experienced in my poor, sheltered life.

Emile had earned near the ocean where you grew up. Perhaps you remember his wealth quickly, from investments in lumber and steel. it?"

He was a spender, a risk taker—he went over the boards when he got an idea. I suppose that is why he was drawn to She nodded toward the diner, and it al came back to Eddie. a poor girl like me. He abhorred those who were born into Of course. That place. He used to eat breakfast there. A wealth, and rather enjoyed doing things the 'sophisticated people' would never do.

of the inter_national exhibitions in Germany. There were towers and spires and thousands of incandescent lights, so

"One of those things was visiting seaside resorts. He loved bright that at night, you could see the park from a ship's the attractions, the salty food, the gypsies and for_tunedeck on the ocean. tel ers and weight guessers and diving girls. And we both loved the sea. One day, as we sat in the sand, the tide rol ing

"Emile hired hundreds of workers, municipal workers and gently to our feet, he asked for my hand in marriage. carnival workers and foreign workers. He brought in an_imals and acrobats and clowns. The entrance was the

"I was overjoyed. I told him yes and we heard the sounds of last thing finished, and it was truly grand. Everyone said so. children playing in the ocean. Emile went over the boards When it was complete, he took me there with a cloth again and swore that soon he would build a re_sort park just blind_fold over my eyes. When he removed the blindfold, I for me, to capture the happiness of this mo_ment—to stay saw it."

eternal y young."

The old woman took a step back from Eddie. She looked at The old woman smiled. "Emile kept his promise. A few him curiously, as if she were disappointed.

years later, he made a deal with the railroad company, which was looking for a way to increase its riders on the

"The entrance?" she said. "Don't you remember? Didn't weekend. That's how most amusement parks were built, you you ever wonder about the name? Where you worked?

know."

Where your father worked?"

Eddie nodded. He knew. Most people didn't. They thought She touched her chest softly with her white-gloved fingers. amusement parks were constructed by elves, built with Then she dipped, as if formal y introducing herself. candy canes. In fact, they were simply business opportunities for railroad companies, who erected them at

"I," she said, "am Ruby."

the final stops of routes, so commuters would have a reason to ride on weekends, You know where I work? Eddie used to say. The end of the line. That's where I work.

"Emile," the old woman continued, "built the most wonderful place, a massive pier using timber and steel he already owned. Then came the magical attractions—races and rides and boat trips and tiny railways. There was a Today Is Eddie's Birthday

carousel im_ported from France and a Ferris wheel from one He is 33. He wakes with a jolt, gasping for breath. His He dresses quietly and goes down the stairs. The taxi is thick, black hair is matted with sweat. He blinks hard parked by the corner, its usual spot, and Eddie wipes the against the darkness, try_ing desperately to focus on his moisture from its windshield. He never speaks about the arm, his knuckles, anything to know that he is here, in the darkness to Marguerite. She strokes his hair and says, apartment over the bakery, and not back in the war, in the

"What's wrong?" and he says, "Nothing, I'm just beat," and vil age, in the fire. That dream. Wil it ever stop?

leaves it at that. How can he explain such sad_ness when she is supposed to make him happy? The truth is he can_not It is just before 4 A.M. No point in going back to sleep. He explain it himself. Al he knows is that something stepped in waits until his breathing subsides, then slowly rol s off the front of him, blocking his way, until in time he gave up on bed, trying not to wake his wife. He puts his right leg down things, he gave up studying engineering and he gave up on first, out of habit, avoid_ing the inevitable stiffness of his the idea of trav_eling. He sat down in his life. And there he left. Eddie begins every morning the same way. One step remained.

and one hobble.

This night, when Eddie returns from work, he parks the taxi In the bathroom, he checks his bloodshot eyes and splashes by the corner. He comes slowly up the stairs. From his water on his face. It is always the same dream: Eddie apartment, he hears music, a familiar song.

wandering through the flames in the Philippines on his last night of war. The vil age huts are engulfed in fire, and there

"You made me love you

is a constant, high-pitched squealing noise. Something invisible hits Eddie's legs and he swats at it but misses, and I didn't want to do it,

then swats again and misses again. The flames grow more intense, roaring like an engine, and then Smitty appears, I didn't want to do it. . . ."

yel ing for Eddie, yel ing, "Come on! Come on!" Eddie tries to speak but when he opens his mouth, the high-pitched He opens the door to see a cake on the table and a smal squeal emerges from his throat. Then something grabs his white bag, tied with ribbon.

legs, pul ing him under the muddy earth.

"Honey?" Marguerite yel s from the bedroom. "Is that And then he wakes up. Sweating. Panting. Always the same. you?"

The worst part is not the sleeplessness. The worst part is the general darkness the dream leaves over him, a gray film He lifts the white bag. Taffy. From the pier.

that clouds the day. Even his happy moments feel encased, like holes jabbed in a hard sheet of ice.

"Happy birthday to you... " Marguerite emerges, singing in her soft sweet voice. She looks beautiful, wearing the print dress Ed_die likes, her hair and lips done up. Eddie feels the need to inhale, as if undeserving of such a moment. He

"The old entrance . . ." Eddie said. fights the darkness within him, "Leave me alone," he tel s it.

"Let me feel this the way I should feel it." She nodded in satisfaction. The original Ruby Pier en_trance had been something of a landmark, a giant Marguerite finishes the song and kisses him on the lips.

arching structure based on a historic French temple, with fluted columns and a coved dome at the top. Just beneath

"Want to fight me for the taffy?" she whispers. that dome, under which al patrons would pass, was the painted face of a beautiful woman. This woman. Ruby. He moves to kiss her again. Someone raps on the door.

"But that thing was destroyed a long time ago," Eddie said.

"Eddie! Are you in there? Eddie?"

"There was a big . . ."

Mr. Nathanson, the baker, lives in the ground-level He paused.

apartment behind the store. He has a telephone. When Eddie opens the door, he is standing in the doorway,

"Fire," the old woman said. "Yes. A very big fire." She wearing a bathrobe. He looks concerned.

dropped her chin, and her eyes looked down through her spectacles, as if she were reading from her lap.

"Eddie," he says. "Come down. There's a phone cal . I think something happened to your father."

"It was Independence Day, the Fourth of July—a holi_day. Emile loved holidays. 'Good for business,' he'd say. If Independence Day went wel , the entire summer might go wel . So Emile arranged for fireworks. He brought in a marching band. He even hired extra workers, roustabouts mostly, just for that weekend.

"But something happened the night before the celebration. I AM RUBY."

It was hot, even after the sun went down, and a few of the roustabouts chose to sleep outside, behind the work sheds. It suddenly made sense to Eddie, why the woman looked They lit a fire in a metal barrel to roast their food. familiar. He had seen a photograph, somewhere in the back of the repair shop, among the old manuals and paperwork

"As the night went on, there was drinking and carous_ing. from the park's initial ownership.

The workers got ahold of some of the smal er fire_works. They set

them off. The wind blew. The sparks flew. spent modestly, me tending to my wounded husband and Everything in those days was made of lathe and tar. . . ." silently nurturing a single wish."

She shook her head. "The rest happened quickly. The fire She stopped.

spread to the midway and the food stalls and on to the animal cages. The roustabouts ran off. By the time someone

"What wish?" Eddie said.

came to our home to wake us, Ruby Pier was in flames. From our window we saw the horrible orange blaze. We

"That he had never built that place." heard the horses' hooves and the steamer engines of the fire companies. People were in the street.

"I begged Emile not to go, but that was fruitless. Of course he would go. He would go to the raging fire and he would THE OLD WOMAN sat in silence. Eddie studied the vast try to salvage his years of work and he would lose himself jade sky. He thought about how many times he had wished in anger and fear and when the entrance caught fire, the this same thing, that whoever had built Ruby Pier had done entrance with my name and my picture, he lost all sense of something else with his money.

where he was, too. He was trying to throw buckets of water when a column collapsed upon him."

"I'm sorry about your husband," Eddie said, mostly because he didn't know what else to say.

She put her fingers together and raised them to her lips. "In the course of one night, our lives were changed forever. The old woman smiled. "Thank you, dear. But we lived Risk taker that he was, Emile had acquired only minimal many years beyond those flames. We raised three children. insurance on the pier. He lost his fortune. His splendid gift Emile was sickly, in and out of the hospital. He left me a to me was gone.

widow in my fifties. You see this face, these wrinkles?" She turned her cheeks upward. "I earned every one of them."

"In desperation, he sold the charred grounds to a businessman from Pennsylvania for far less than it was Eddie frowned. "I don't understand. Did we ever . . . meet?"

worth. That businessman kept the name, Ruby Pier, and in Did you ever come to the pier?"

time, he reopened the park. But it was not ours anymore.

"No," she said. "I never wanted to see the pier again. My

"Emile's spirit was as broken as his body. It took three children went there, and their children and theirs. But not years before he could walk on his own. We moved away, to me. My idea of heaven was as far from the ocean as a place outside the city, a smal flat, where our lives were pos_sible, back in that busy diner, when my days were simple, when Emile was courting me."

fever.

Eddie rubbed his temples. When he breathed, mist emerged.

"Eddie, I'm afraid," his mother said, her voice shaking. She told him of a night, earlier in the week, when his father had

"So why am I here?" he said. "I mean, your story, the fire, come home at dawn, soaking wet. His clothes were ful of it al happened before I was born."

sand. He was missing a shoe. She said he smel ed like the ocean. Eddie bet he smel ed like liquor, too.

"Things that happen before you are born stil affect you," she said. "And people who come before your time af_fect

"He was coughing," his mother explained. "It just got you as wel .

worse. We should have cal ed a doctor right away. . . ." She drifted in her words. He'd gone to work that day, she said,

"We move through places every day that would never have sick as he was, with his tool belt and his bal peen been if not for those who came before us. Our workplaces, hammer—same as always—but that night he'd refused to where we spend so much time—we often think they began eat and in bed he'd hacked and wheezed and sweated with our arrival. That's not true."

through his un_dershirt. The next day was worse. And now, this afternoon, he'd col apsed.

She tapped her fingertips together. "If not for Emile, I would have no

husband. If not for our marriage, there

"The doctor said it's pneumonia. Oh, I should have done would be no pier. If there'd been no pier, you would not something. I should have done something. . . ." have ended up working there."

"What were you supposed to do?" Eddie asked. He was Eddie scratched his head. "So you're here to tel me about mad that she took this on herself. It was his father's drunken work?"

fault.

"No, dear," Ruby answered, her voice softening. "I'm here Through the phone, he heard her crying.

to tel you why your father died."

EDDIE'S FATHER USED to say he'd spent so many years THE PHONE CALL was from Eddie's mother. His father by the ocean, he breathed seawater. Now, away from that had col apsed that afternoon, on the east end of the ocean, in the confines of a hospital bed, his body began to boardwalk near the Junior Rocket Ride. He had a raging wither like a beached fish. Complications developed.

Congestion built in his chest. His condition went from fair say, did the only thing he could think of to do: He held up to stable and from stable to serious. Friends went from his hands and showed his father his grease-stained saying, "He'l be home in a day," to "He'l be home in a fingertips.

week." In his father's absence, Eddie helped out at the pier, working evenings after his taxi job, greasing the tracks,

"Don't sweat it, kid," the other maintenance workers told checking the brake pads, testing the levers, even repairing him. "Your old man wil pul through. He's the tough_est broken ride parts in the shop.

son of a gun we've ever seen."

What he real y was doing was protecting his father's job. The owners acknowledged his efforts, then paid him half of what his father earned. He gave the money to his mother, who went to the hospital every day and slept there most PARENTS RARELY LET go of their children, so children nights. Eddie and Marguerite cleaned her apartment and let go of them. They move on. They move away. The

shopped for her food.

moments that used to define them—a mother's approval, a father's nod—are covered by moments of their own. When Eddie was a teenager, if he ever complained or accomplished anything. It is not until

much later, as the skin sags seemed bored with the pier, his father would snap, "What?

and the heart weakens, that children understand; their. "This ain't good enough for you?" And later, when he'd stories, and all their accomplishments, sit atop the stories of suggested Eddie take a job there after high school, Eddie their mothers and fathers, stones upon stones, beneath the almost laughed, and his father again said, "What? This ain't waters of their lives.

good enough for you?" And before Eddie went to war, when he'd talked of marrying Marguerite and becoming an. When the news came that his father had died—"slipped engineer, his father said, "What?

"This ain't good enough for away," a nurse told him, as if he had gone out for you?"

milk—Eddie felt the emptiest kind of anger, the kind that circles in its cage. Like most workingmen's sons, Eddie had. And now, despite all that, here he was, at the pier, doing envisioned for his father a heroic death to counter the his father's labor.

commonness of his life. There was nothing heroic about a drunken stupor by the beach.

Finally, one night, at his mother's urging, Eddie visited the hospital. He entered the room slowly. His father, who for. The next day, he went to his parents' apartment, entered years had refused to speak to Eddie, now lacked the their bedroom, and opened all the drawers, as if he might strength to even try. He watched his son with heavy-lidded find a piece of his father inside. He rifled through coins, a eyes.

Eddie, after struggling to find even one sentence to tie pin, a small bottle of apple brandy, rubber bands, electric bills, pens, and a cigarette lighter with a mermaid on the an eye on his mother, a position he had been groomed for side. Finally, he found a deck of playing cards. He put it in summer after summer: a maintenance man at Ruby Pier. his pocket.

Eddie never said this—not to his wife, not to his mother, not to

anyone—but he cursed his father for dying and for trapping him in the very life he'd been trying to escape; a life that, as he heard the old man laughing from the grave, apparently now was good enough for him.

THE FUNERAL WAS small and brief. In the weeks that followed, Eddie's mother lived in a daze. She spoke to her husband as if he were still there. She yelled at him to turn down the radio. She cooked enough food for two. She fluffed pillows on both sides of the bed, even though only one side had been slept in.

One night, Eddie saw her stacking dishes on the countertop. Today Is Eddie's Birthday

"Let me help you," he said.

He is 37. His breakfast is getting cold.

"No, no," his mother answered, "your father will put them

"You see any salt?" Eddie asks Noel.

away."

Noel, chewing a mouthful of sausage, slides out from the Eddie put a hand on her shoulder.

booth, leans across another table, and grabs a salt shaker.

"Ma," he said, softly. "Dad's gone."

"Here," he mumbles. "Happy birthday."

"Gone where?"

Eddie shakes it hard. "How tough is it to keep salt on the table?"

The next day, Eddie went to the dispatcher and told him he was quitting. Two weeks later, he and Marguerite moved

"What are you, the manager?" Noel says. back into the building where Eddie had grown up, Beachwood Avenue—apartment 6B—where the hallway Eddie shrugs. The morning is already hot and thick with were narrow and the kitchen window viewed the carousel humidity. This is their routine: breakfast, once a week, and where Eddie had accepted a job that would let him keep Saturday mornings, before the park gets crazy. Noel works in the dry cleaning business. Ed die

helped him get the emerges from the train station. They carry towels, contract for Ruby Pier's maintenance uniforms. umbrel as, wicker baskets with sandwiches wrapped in paper. Some even have the newest thing: foldable chairs,

"What'dya think of this good-lookin' guy?" Noel says. He made from lightweight aluminum.

has a copy of Life magazine open to a photo of a young political candi_date. "How can this guy run for president?

An old man walks past in a panama hat, smoking a cigar. He's a kid!"

"Lookit that guy, "Eddie says. "I promise you, he'l drop Eddie shrugs. "He's about our age."

that cigar on the boardwalk."

"No foolin'?" Noel says. He lifts an eyebrow. "I thought

"Yeah?" Noel says. "So?"

you had to be older to be president."

"It fal s in the cracks, then it starts to burn. You can smel

"We are older, "Eddie mumbles.

it. The chemical they put on the wood. It starts smoking right away. Yesterday I grabbed a kid, couldn't have been more Noel closes the magazine. His voice drops. "Hey. You hear than four years old, about to put a cigar butt in his mouth." what happened at Brighton?"

Noel makes a face. "And?"

Eddie nods. He sips his coffee. He'd heard. An amusement park A gondola ride. Something snapped. A mother and her Eddie turns aside. "And nothing. People should be more son fel 60 feet to their death.

careful, that's al ."

"You know anybody up there?"Noel asks. Noel shovels a forkful of sausage into bis mouth. "You're a bar_rel of laughs. You always this much fun on your Eddie puts his tongue between his teeth. Every now and then birthday?"

he hears these stories, an accident at a park somewhere, and he

shud_ders as if a wasp just flew by his ear. Not a Eddie doesn't answer. The old darkness has taken a seat day passes that he doesn 't worry about it happening here, along_side him. He is used to it by now, making room for it at Ruby Pier, under his watch.

the way you make room for a commuter on a crowded bus.

"Nuh-uh," he says. "I don't know no one in Brighton." He thinks about the maintenance load today. Broken mirror in the Fun House. New fenders for the bumper cars. Glue, He fixes his eyes out the window, as a crowd of beachgoers he reminds himself, gotta order more glue. He thinks about those poor people in Brighton. He wonders who's in charge people rely on you, one day you wake up and you can't tel up there.

Tuesday from Thursday. You're doing the same boring stuff, you're a 'ride man,' just like . . ."

"What time you finish today?" Noel asks.

"Your father?"

Eddie exhales. "It's gonna be busy. Summer. Saturday. You know."

Eddie said nothing.

Noel lifts an eyebrow. "We can make the track by six."

"He was hard on you," the old woman said. Eddie thinks about Marguerite. He always thinks about Eddie lowered his eyes. "Yeah. So?"

Mar_guerite when Noel mentions the horse track.

"Perhaps you were hard on him, too."

"Come on. It's your birthday," Noel says.

"I doubt it. You know the last time he talked to me?" Eddie pokes a fork at his eggs, now too cold to bother with.

"The last time he tried to strike you."

"Al right," he says.

Eddie shot her a look.

"And you know the last thing he said to me? 'Get a job.'"

Some father, huh?"

The old woman pursed her lips. "You began to work after that. You picked yourself up."

The Third Lesson

Eddie felt a rumbling of anger. "Look," he snapped. "You

"WAS THE PIER SO BAD?" THE OLD woman asked. didn't know the guy."

"It wasn't my choice," Eddie said, sighing. "My mother

"That's true." She rose. "But I know something you don't. needed help. One thing led to another. "Years passed. I And it is time to show you."

never left. I never lived nowhere else. Never made any real money. "You know how it is—you get used to something, yel ed, and pushed on Mickey's chest while stil gripping her robe. He was bigger and stronger, and he buried his RUBY POINTED WITH the tip of her parasol and drew a unshaven face below her cheek, smearing tears on her neck. circle in the snow. When Eddie looked into the circle, he felt as if his eyes were fal ing from their sockets and Then the front door opened and Eddie's father stood there, travel_ing on their own, down a hole and into another wet from rain, a bal peen hammer hanging from his belt. moment. The images sharpened. It was years ago, in the old He ran into the bedroom and saw Mickey grabbing his wife. apart_ment. He could see front and back, above and below.

Eddie's father hol ered. He raised the ham_mer. Mickey put his hands over his head and charged to the door, knocking This is what he saw:

Eddie's father sideways. Eddie's mother was crying, her chest heaving, her face streamed with tears. Her husband He saw his mother, looking concerned, sitting at the kitchen grabbed her shoulders. He shook her violently. Her robe table. He saw Mickey Shea, sitting across from her. Mickey fel . They were both screaming. Then Eddie's father left the looked awful. He was soaking wet, and he kept rubbing his apartment, smashing a lamp with the hammer on his way hands over his forehead and down his nose. He began to out. He thumped down the steps and ran off into the rainy sob. Eddie's mother

brought him a glass of water. She night.

motioned for him to wait, and walked to the bedroom and shut the door. She took off her shoes and her house-dress. She reached for a blouse and skirt.

Eddie could see al the rooms, but he could not hear what

"WHAT WAS THAT?" Eddie yel ed in disbelief. "What the two of them were saying, it was just blurred noise. He the hel was THAT?"

saw Mickey, in the kitchen, ignoring the glass of water, pul ing a flask from his jacket and swigging from it. Then, The old woman held her tongue. She stepped to the side of slowly, he got up and staggered to the bedroom. He opened the snowy circle and drew another one. Eddie tried not to the door.

look down. He couldn't help it. He was fal ing again, be_coming eyes at a scene.

Eddie saw his mother, half dressed, turn in surprise. Mickey was wobbling. She pul ed a robe around her. Mickey came This is what he saw:

closer. Her hand went out instinctively to block him. Mickey froze, just for an instant, then grabbed that hand and He saw a rainstorm at the farthest edge of Ruby Pier—the grabbed Eddie's mother and backed her into the wal ,

"north point," they cal ed it—a narrow jetty that stretched leaning against her, grabbing her waist. She squirmed, then far out into the ocean. The sky was a bluish black. The rain was fal ing in sheets.

Mickey Shea came stumbling toward shoreward. Mickey moaned and gasped. Eddie's fa_ther spit the edge of the jetty. He fel to the ground, his stomach out seawater. It seemed to take forever, the rain pop_ping, heaving in and out. He lay there for a moment, face to the the white foam smacking their faces, the two men grunting, darkened sky, then rol ed on his side, under the wood thrashing their arms.

Final y, a high, curling wave lifted railing. He dropped into the sea.

them up and dumped them onto the sand, and Eddie's father rol ed out from under Mickey and was able to hook his Eddie's father appeared moments later, scrambling back and hands under Mickey's arms and hold him from being swept forth, the hammer stil in his hand. He grabbed the railing, into the surf. When the waves receded, he yanked Mickey searching the waters. The wind blew the rain in

sideways. forward with a final surge, then collapsed on the shore, his
His clothes were drenched and his leather tool belt was mouth open,
filling with wet sand.

nearly black from the soaking. He saw something in the waves. He
stopped, pulled off the belt, yanked off one shoe, tried to undo the
other, gave up, squatted under the railing and jumped, splashing
clumsily in the churning ocean. EDDIE'S VISION RETURNED to his
body. He felt

Mickey was bobbing in the insistent roll of seawater, half exhausted,
spent, as if he had been in that ocean himself. unconscious, a foamy
yellow fluid coming from his mouth. His head was heavy.

Everything he thought he'd known Eddie's father swam to him, yellowing
into the wind. about his father, he didn't seem to know anymore. He
grabbed Mickey. Mickey swung. Eddie's father swung

"What was he doing?" Eddie whispered. back. The skies clapped with
thunder as the rainwater pelted them. They grabbed and flailed in the
violent chop.

"Saving a friend," Ruby said.

Mickey coughed hard as Eddie's father grabbed his arm and Eddie
glared at her. "Some friend. If I'd have known what hooked it over his
shoulder. He went under, came up again, he did, I'd have let his
drunken hide drown." then braced his weight against Mickey's body,
pointing them toward shore. He kicked. They moved forward. A

"Your father thought about that, too," the old woman said. wave swept
them back. Then forward again. The ocean

"He had chased after Mickey to hurt him, perhaps even to thumped
and crashed, but Eddie's father remained wedged kill him. But in the
end, he couldn't. He knew who Mickey under Mickey's armpit,
pumping his legs, blinking wildly to was. He knew his shortcomings.
He knew he drank. He clear his vision.

knew his judgment faltered.

They caught the crest of a wave and made sudden progress

"But many years earlier, when your father was looking for work, it
was Mickey who went to the pier owner and

"Fifty-six," Eddie said blankly.

vouched for him. And when you were born, it was Mickey who lent your parents what little money he had, to help pay

"Fifty-six," the old woman repeated. "His body had been for the extra mouth to feed. Your father took old friendships weakened, the ocean had left him vulnerable, pneumonia seriously—"

took hold of him, and in time, he died."

"Hold on, lady," Eddie snapped. "Did you see what that

"Because of Mickey?" Eddie said.

bastard was doing with my mother?"

"Because of loyalty," she said.

"I did," the old woman said sadly. "It was wrong. But things are not always what they seem.

"People don't die because of loyalty."

"Mickey had been fired that afternoon. He'd slept through

"They don't?" She smiled. "Religion? Government? Are we another shift, too drunk to wake up, and his employers told not loyal to such things, sometimes to the death?" him that was enough. He handled the news as he handled all bad news, by drinking more, and he was thick with whiskey Eddie shrugged.

by the time he reached your mother. He was begging for help. He wanted his job back. Your father was working late.

"Better," she said, "to be loyal to one another." Your mother was going to take Mickey to him.

"Mickey was coarse, but he was not evil. At that moment, he was lost, adrift, and what he did was an act of loneliness and desperation. He acted on impulse. A bad impulse. Your AFTER THAT, THE two of them remained in the snowy father acted on impulse, too, and while his first impulse was mountain valley for a long time. At least to Eddie it felt to kill, his final impulse was to keep a man alive." long. He wasn't sure how long things took anymore. She crossed her hands over the end of her parasol.

"What happened to Mickey Shea?" Eddie said.

"That was how he took it, of course. He lay there on the

"He died, alone, a few years later," the old woman said. Beach for hours, soaking and exhausted, before he had the

"Drank his way to the grave. He never forgave himself for strength to struggle home. Your father was no longer a what happened."

young man. He was already in his fifties."

"But my old man," Eddie said, rubbing his forehead. "He never said anything."

approaching. Perhaps he only knew you were all out there somewhere, in the streets beneath his window. He bent over

"He never spoke of that night again, not to your mother, not the ledge. The night was chilly. The wind and damp, in his to anyone else. He was ashamed for her, for Mickey, for state, were too much. He was dead before dawn. himself. In the hospital, he stopped speaking altogether. Silence was his escape, but silence is rarely a refuge. His

"The nurses who found him dragged him back to his bed. thoughts still haunted him.

They were frightened for their jobs, so they never breathed a word. The story was he died in his sleep."

"One night his breathing slowed and his eyes closed and he could not be awakened. The doctors said he had fallen into Eddie's back, stunned. He thought about that final image. a coma."

His father, the tough old war horse, trying to crawl out a window. Where was he going? What was he thinking?

Eddie remembered that night. Another phone call to Mr. Which was worse when left unexplained: a life, or a death?

Nathanson. Another knock on his door.

"After that, your mother stayed by his bedside. Days and nights. She would moan to herself, softly, as if she were praying: 'I should have done something. I should have done HOW DO YOU know all this?'"

Eddie asked Ruby. something.'

She sighed. "Your father lacked the money for a hospital

"Finally, one night, at the doctors' urging, she went home to room of his own. So did the man on the other side of the sleep. Early the next morning, a nurse found your father curtain."

slumped halfway out the window."

She paused.

"Wait," Eddie said. His eyes narrowed. "The window?"

"Emile. My husband."

Ruby nodded. "Sometime during the night, your father awakened. He rose from his bed, staggered across the room, Eddie lifted his eyes. His head moved back as if he'd just and found the strength to raise the window sash. He called solved a puzzle.

your mother's name with what little voice he had, and he called yours, too, and your brother, Joe. And he called for

"Then you saw my father."

Mickey. At that moment, it seemed, his heart was spilling out, all the guilt and regret. Perhaps he felt the light of death

"Yes."

Ruby stepped toward him. "Edward," she said softly. It was

"And my mother."

the first time she had called him by name. "Learn this from me. Holding anger is a poison. It eats you from inside. We

"I heard her moaning on those lonely nights. We never think that hating is a weapon that attacks the person who spoke. But after your father's death, I inquired about your harmed us. But hatred is a curved blade. And the harm we family. When I learned where he had worked, I felt a do, we do to ourselves.

stinging pain, as if I had lost a loved one myself. The pier that bore my name. I felt its cursed shadow, and I wished

"Forgive, Edward. Forgive. Do you remember the again that it had never been built.

light_ness you felt when you first arrived in heaven?"

"That wish fol owed me to heaven, even as I waited for Eddie did. Where is my pain?

you."

"That's because no one is born with anger. And when we Eddie looked confused.

die, the soul is freed of it. But now, here, in order to move on, you must understand why you felt what you did, and

"The diner?" she said. She pointed to the speck of light in why you no longer need to feel it."

the mountains. "It's there because I wanted to re_turn to my younger years, a simple but secure life. And I wanted al She touched his hand.

those who had ever suffered at Ruby Pier—every accident, every fire, every fight, slip, and fal —to be safe and secure.

"You need to forgive your father."

I wanted them al like I wanted my Emile, warm, wel fed, in the cradle of a welcoming place, far from the sea." Ruby stood, and Eddie stood, too. He could not stop thinking about his father's death.

EDDIE THOUGHT ABOUT the years that fol owed his father's funeral. How he never achieved anything, how he

"I hated him," he mumbled.

never went anywhere. For al that time, Eddie had imagined a certain life—a "could have been" life—that would have The old woman nodded.

been his if not for his father's death and his mother's subsequent col apse. Over the years, he glorified that

"He was hel on me as a kid. And he was worse when I got imaginary life and held his father accountable for al of its older."

losses: the loss of freedom, the loss of career, the loss of hope. He never rose above the dirty, tiresome work his father had left behind.

his father, smoking a cigar. He felt a shiver. He thought about the old

man hanging out that hospital win_dow, dying

"When he died," Eddie said, "he took part of me with him. alone in the middle of the night.

I was stuck after that."

"Dad?" Eddie whispered.

Ruby shook her head, "Your father is not the reason you never left the pier."

His father could not hear him. Eddie drew closer. "Dad. I know what happened now."

Eddie looked up. "Then what is?"

He felt a choke in his chest. He dropped to his knees She patted her skirt. She adjusted her spectacles. She began alongside the booth. His father was so close that Eddie to walk away. "There are stil two people for you to meet," could see the whiskers on his face and the frayed end of his she said.

cigar. He saw the baggy lines beneath his tired eyes, the bent nose, the bony knuckles and squared shoulders of a Eddie tried to say "Wait," but a cold wind nearly ripped the workingman. He looked at his own arms and realized, in his voice from his throat. Then everything went black. earthly body, he was now older than his father. He had outlived him in every way.

"I was angry with you, Dad. I hated you." RUBY WAS GONE. He was back atop the mountain,

Eddie felt tears wel ing. He felt a shaking in his chest. outside the diner, standing in the snow.

Something was flushing out of him.

He stood there for a long time, alone in the silence, un_til

"You beat me. You shut me out. I didn't understand. I stil he realized the old woman was not coming back. Then he don't understand. Why did you do it? Why?" He drew in turned to the door and slowly pul ed it open. He heard long painful breaths. "I didn't know, OK? I didn't know clanking silverware and dishes being stacked. He smel ed your life, what happened. I didn't know you. But you're my freshly cooked

food—breads and meats and sauces. The father. I'll let it go now, all right? All right? Can we let the spirits of those who had perished at the pier be all around, go?

engaged with one another, eating and drinking and talking. His voice wobbled until it was high and wailing, not his Eddie moved haltingly, knowing what he was there to do. own anymore. "OK? YOU

HEAR ME?" he screamed. Then He turned to his right, to the corner booth, to the ghost of softer: "You hear me? Dad?"

attendees had to get back to work.

He leaned in close. He saw his father's dirty hands. He spoke the last familiar words in a whisper.

A few minutes before the service, the pastor asked Dominguez, wearing a navy blue sport coat and his good

"It's fixed."

black jeans, to step inside his office.

Eddie pounded the table, then slumped to the floor. When

"Could you share some of the deceased's unique qualities?" he looked up, he saw Ruby standing across the way, young the pastor asked. "I understand you worked with him." and beautiful. She dipped her head, opened the door, and lifted off into the jade sky.

Dominguez swallowed. He was none too comfortable with clergymen. He hooked his fingers together earnestly, as if giving the matter some thought, and spoke as softly as he thought one should speak in such a situation.

"Eddie," he finally said, "really loved his wife." He unhooked his fingers, then quickly added, "Of course, I THURSDAY, 11 A.M.

never met her."

Who would pay for Eddie's funeral? He had no relatives. He'd left no instructions. His body remained at the city morgue, as did his clothes and personal effects, his maintenance shirt, his socks and shoes, his linen cap, his The Fourth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven

wedding ring, his cigarettes and pipe cleaners, all awaiting claim.

EDDIE BLINKED, AND FOUND HIMSELF IN A small,

round room. The mountains were gone and so was the jade In the end, Mr. Bul ock, the park owner, footed the bil, sky. A low plaster ceiling just missed his head. The room using the money he saved from Eddie's no-longer-cashable was brown—as plain as shipping wrap—and empty, save paycheck. The casket was a wooden box. The church was for a wooden stool and an oval mirror on the wall. chosen

by location—the one nearest the pier—as most Eddie stepped in front of the mirror. He cast no reflection. center of the group, removing a pin from her butter-colored He saw only the reverse of the room, which expanded hair. The groom was lanky. He wore a black wedding coat suddenly to include a row of doors. Eddie turned around. and held up a sword, and at the hilt of the sword was a ring. He lowered it toward the bride and guests cheered as she Then he coughed.

took it. Eddie heard their voices, but the language was for_eign. German? Swedish?

The sound startled him, as if it came from someone else. He coughed again, a hard, rumbling cough, as if things needed He coughed again. The group looked up. Every person to be resettled in his chest.

seemed to smile, and the smiling frightened Eddie. He backed quickly through the door from which he'd entered, When did this start? Eddie thought. He touched his skin, figuring to return to the round room. Instead, he was in the which had aged since his time with Ruby. It felt thinner middle of another wedding, indoors this time, in a large now, and drier. His midsection, which during his time with hal, where the people looked Spanish and the bride wore the Captain had felt tight as pul ed rubber, was loose with orange blossoms in her hair. She was dancing from one flab, the droop of age.

partner to the next, and each guest handed her a small sack of coins.

There are still two people for you to meet, Ruby had said. And then what? His lower back had a dull ache. His bad leg Eddie coughed again—he couldn't help it—and when was growing stiffer. He realized what was happening, it several of the guests looked up, he backed through the door hap_pened with each new stage of heaven. He was rotting and again entered a different wedding scene, something away.

African, Eddie guessed, where families poured wine onto the ground and the couple held hands and jumped over a broom. Then another pass through the door to a Chinese re_ception, where firecrackers were

lit before cheering attendees, then another doorway to something else—maybe HE APPROACHED ONE of the doors and pushed it open. French?— where the couple drank together

from a two Suddenly, he was outside, in the yard of a home he had handled cup.

never seen, in a land that he did not recognize, in the midst of what appeared to be a wedding reception. Guests holding How long does this go on? Eddie thought. In each silver plates filled the grassy lawn. At one end stood an arch, there were no signs of how the people had gotten away covered in red flowers and birch branches, and at there, no cars or buses, no wagons, no horses.

Departure did the other end, next to Eddie, stood the door that he had not appear to be an issue. The guests milled about, and walked through. The bride, young and pretty, was in the Eddie was absorbed as one of them, smiled at but never spoken to, much like the handful of weddings he had gone were vineyards on the hill sides and farmhouses of travertine to on earth. He preferred it that way.

Weddings were, in stone. Many of the men had thick, black hair, combed back Eddie's mind, too full of embarrassing moments, like when and wet, and the women had dark eyes and sharp features.

couples were asked to join in a dance, or to help lift the Eddie found a place against a wall and watched the bride bride in a chair. His bad leg seemed to glow at those and groom cut a log in half with a two-handed rip saw. moments, and he felt as if people could see it from across Music played—flutists, violinists, guitarists— and guests the room.

began the tarantella, dancing in a wild, twirling rhythm. Eddie took a few steps back. His eyes wandered to the edge Because of that, Eddie avoided most receptions, and when of the crowd.

he did go, he often stood in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette, waiting for time to pass. For a long stretch, there A bridesmaid in a long lavender dress and a stitched straw were no weddings to attend, anyhow. Only in the late years that moved through the guests, with a basket of candy of his life, when some of his teenaged pier workers had covered almonds. From afar, she looked to be in her 20s.

grown up and taken spouses, did he find himself getting the faded suit out of the closet and putting on the colored

"Per l'amaro e il dolce?" she said, offering her sweets. shirt that pinched his thick neck. By this point, his once "Per l'amaro e il dolce?... Per l'amaro e il dolce?..." fractured leg bones were spurred and deformed. Arthritis had invaded his knee. He limped badly and was thus At the sound of her voice, Eddie's whole body shook. He excused from al participatory moments, such as dances or began to sweat. Something told him to run, but something candle lightings. He was considered an "old man," alone, else froze his feet to the ground. She came his way. Her unattached, and no one expected him to do much besides eyes found him from beneath the hat brim, which was smile when the photographer came to the table. topped with parchment flowers.

Here, now, in his maintenance clothes, he moved from one

"Per l'amaro e il dolce?" she said, smiling, holding out the wedding to the next, one reception to another, one almonds. "For the bitter and the sweet?" lan_guage, one cake, and one type of music to another language, another cake, and another type of music. The Her dark hair fel over one eye and Eddie's heart nearly uniformity did not surprise Eddie. He always figured a burst. His lips took a moment to part, and the sound from wedding here was not much different from a wedding there. the back of his throat took a moment to rise, but they came What he didn't get was what this had to do with him. together in the first letter of the only name that ever made him feel this way. He dropped to his knees.

He pushed through the threshold one more time and found himself in what appeared to be an Italian vil age. There

"Marguerite . . ." he whispered.

That morning, Joe had told Eddie his new salary. It was

"For the bitter and the sweet," she said. three times what Eddie made. Then Joe had congratulated Eddie on his promotion: head of maintenance for Ruby Pier, his father's old posi_tion. Eddie had wanted to answer, "If it's so great, why don't you take it, and I'll take your job?" But he didn't. Eddie never said any_thing he felt that deeply.

"Hel oo? Anybody in here?"

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

Marguerite is at the door, holding a reel of orange tickets. Eddie and

his brother are sitting in the maintenance shop. Ed_die's eyes go, as always, to her face, her olive skin, her dark coffee eyes. She has taken a job in the ticket booths this

"This," Joe says proudly, holding up a drill "is the newest summer and she wears the official Ruby Pier uniform: a model."

white shirt, a red vest, black stirrup pants, a red beret, and her name on a pin below her collarbone. The sight of it Joe is wearing a checkered sport coat and black-and-white makes Eddie angry—

especially in front of his hotshot saddle shoes. Eddie thinks his brother looks too fancy—and brother.

fancy means phony—but Joe is a salesman for a hardware company now and Ed_die has been wearing the same outfit

"Show her the drill," Joe says. He turns to Marguerite. "It's for years, so what does he know?

battery operated."

"Yes, sir," Joe says, "and get this. It runs on that battery." Eddie squeezes. Marguerite grabs her ears.

Eddie holds the battery between his fingers, a small thing

"It's louder than your snoring," she says. called nickel cadmium. Hard to believe.

"Whoa-ho!" Joe yells, laughing. "Whoa-ho! She got you!"

"Start it up," Joe says, handing the drill over. Eddie looks down sheepishly, then sees his wife smiling. Eddie squeezes the trigger. It explodes in noise.

"Can you come outside?" she says.

"Nice, huh?" Joe yells.

Eddie waves the drill. "I'm working here." Mr. Eddie! Blow them out. Oh, wait, wait... " She fishes in a

"Just for a minute, OK?"

bag and pulls out a camera, a complicated contraption with rods and tabs and a round flashbulb.

Eddie stands up slowly, then follows her out the door. The sun hits his face.

"Charlene let me use it. Its a Polaroid."

"HAP-PY BIRTH-DAY, MR. ED-DIE!" a group of Marguerite lines up the picture, Eddie over the cake, the children scream in unison.

children squeezing in around him, admiring the 38 little flames. One kid pokes Eddie and says, "Blow them all out,

"Well, I'll be," Eddie says.

OK?"

Marguerite yells, "OK, kids, put the candles on the cake!" Eddie looks down. The frosting is a mess, full of countless little handprints.

The children race to a vanilla sheet cake sitting on a nearby folding table. Marguerite leans toward Eddie and whispers,

"I will," Eddie says, but he is looking at his wife.

"I promised them you'd blow out all thirty-eight at once." Eddie snorts. He watches his wife organize the group. As always with Marguerite and children, his mood is lifted by her easy connection to them and dampened by her inability to bear them. One doctor said she was too nervous. Another said she had waited too long, she should have had them by age 25. In time, they ran out of money for EDDIE

STARED AT the young Marguerite.

doctors. It was what it was.

"It's not you," he said.

For nearly a year now, she has been talking about adoption. She went to the library. She brought home papers. Eddie She lowered her almond basket. She smiled sadly. They said they were too old. She said, "What's too old to a tarantula was dancing behind them and the sun was fading child?"

behind a ribbon of white clouds.

Eddie said he'd think about it.

"It's not you," Eddie said again.

"Al right, "she yel s now from the sheet cake. "Come on, The dancers yel ed, "Hooheyy!" They banged tambourines. When the meal was finished and some smal gifts were She offered her hand. Eddie reached for it quickly, given, a final toast was offered and the accordion man instinctively, as if grabbing for a fal ing object. Their packed his case. Eddie and Marguerite left through the front fingers met and he had never felt such a sensation, as if door. It was raining lightly, a chil y rain, but the bride and flesh were forming over his own flesh, soft and warm and groom walked home together, seeing as it was only a few almost tick_lish. She knelt down beside him.

blocks. Marguerite wore her wedding dress beneath a thick pink sweater. Eddie wore his white suit coat, the shirt

"It's not you," he said.

pinching his neck. They held hands. They moved through pools of lamplight. Everything around them seemed

"It is me," she whispered.

buttoned up tight.

Hooheyy!

"It's not you, it's not you, it's not you," Eddie mum_bled, as he dropped his head onto her shoulder and, for the first time PEOPLE SAY THEY "find" love, as if it were an object since his death, began to cry.

hid_den by a rock. But love takes many forms, and it is never the same for any man and woman. What people find then is a certain love. And Eddie found a certain love with Marguerite, a grateful love, a deep but quiet love, one that he knew, above al else, was irreplaceable. Once she'd gone, THEIR OWN WEDDING took place Christmas Eve on the he'd let the days go stale. He put his heart to sleep.

second floor of a dimly lit Chinese restaurant cal ed Sammy Hong's. The owner, Sammy, agreed to rent it for that night, Now, here she was again, as young as the day they were figuring he'd have little other business. Eddie took what wed. "Walk with me," she said.

cash he had left from the army and spent it on the reception—roast chicken and Chinese vegetables and port Eddie tried to stand, but his bad knee buckled. She lifted wine and a man with an accordion.

The chairs for the him effortlessly.

ceremony were needed for the dinner, so once the vows were taken, the waiters asked the guests to rise, then carried

"Your leg," she said, regarding the faded scar with a tender the chairs downstairs to the tables. The accordion man sat familiarity. Then she looked up and touched the tufts of hair on a stool. Years later, Marguerite would joke that the only above his ears.

thing missing from their wedding "were the bingo cards."

"It's white," she said, smiling.

path. The music faded to a background noise. Eddie wanted Eddie couldn't get his tongue to move. He couldn't do much to tel her everything he had seen, everything that had but stare. She was exactly as he remembered—more hap_pened. He wanted to ask her about every little thing beautiful, real y, for his final memories of her had been as and every big thing, too. He felt a churning inside him, a an older, suffering woman. He stood beside her, silent, until stop-start anxiety. He had no idea where to begin. her dark eyes narrowed and her lips crept up mischievously.

"You did this, too?" he final y said. "You met five people?"

"Eddie." She almost giggled. "Have you forgotten so fast how I used to look?"

She nodded.

Eddie swal owed. "I never forgot that."

"A different five people," he said.

She touched his face lightly and the warmth spread through She nodded again.

his body. She motioned to the vil age and the dancing guests.

"And they explained everything? And it made a difference?"

"Al weddings," she said, happily. "That was my choice. A world of weddings, behind every door. Oh, Eddie, it never She smiled. "Al the difference." She touched his chin. changes, when the groom lifts the veil, when the bride

"And then I waited for you."

accepts the ring, the possibilities you see in their eyes, it's the same around the world. They truly believe their love. He studied her eyes. Her smile. He wondered if her waiting and their marriage is going to break all the records." had felt like his.

She smiled. "Do you think we had that?"

"How much do you know . . . about me? I mean, how much do you know since ..."

Eddie didn't know how to answer.

He still had trouble saying it.

"We had an accordion player," he said. THEY WALKED FROM the reception and up a gravel Eddie squeezes his ticket. He is more nervous than he wants Today Is Eddie's Birthday

to be. His skin goes bumpy. One horse pulls ahead of the pack.

The racetrack is crowded with summer customers. The women wear straw sunhats and the men smoke cigars. Jersey Finch!

Eddie and Noel leave work early to play Eddie's birthday number, 39, in the Daily Double. They sit on slatted foldNow Eddie has nearly \$800. down seats. At their feet are paper cups of beer, amidst a carpet of discarded tickets.

"I gotta call home," he says.

Earlier, Eddie won the first race of the day. He'd put half of

"You'll ruin it," Noel says.

those winnings on the second race and won that as well, the first time such a thing had ever happened to him. That gave

"What are you talking about?"

him \$209. After losing twice in smaller bets, he put it all on a horse to win in the sixth, because, as he and Noel agreed,

"You tell somebody, you ruin your luck." in exuberant logic, he'd arrived with next to nothing, so what harm done if he went home the same way?

"You're nuts."

"Just think, if you win," Noel says now, you'll have all that

"Don't do it."

dough for the kid."

"I'm calling her. It'll make her happy." The bell rings. The horses are off. They bunch together on the far straightaway, their colorful silks blurring with their

"It won't make her happy."

bumpy movement. Eddie has No. 8, a horse named Jersey Finch, which isn't a bad gamble, not at four to one, but He limps to a pay phone and drops in a nickel. Marguerite what Noel has just said about

"the kid"—the one Eddie and answers. Eddie tells her the news. Noel is right. She is not Marguerite are planning to adopt—flushes him with guilt. happy. She tells him to come home. He tells her to stop. They could have used that money. Why did he do things like telling him what to do.

this?

"We have a baby coming," she scolds. "You can't keep. The crowd rises. The horses come down the stretch. Jersey behaving like this."

Finch moves outside and lengthens into full stride. The cheering mixes with the thundering hooves. Noel holds. Eddie hangs up the phone with a heat behind his ears. He goes back to Noel, who is eating peanuts at the railing. earlier, had been chased from a liquor store after stealing five cartons of cigarettes and three pints of Old Harper's

"Let me guess," Noel says.

whiskey. Now, having finished the alcohol and smoked many of the cigarettes, they are bored with the evening, and They go to the window and pick another horse. Eddie takes they dangle their empty bottles over the lip of the rusted the money from his pocket. Half of him doesn't want it railing.

anymore and half of him wants twice as much, so he can throw it on the bed when he gets home and tell his wife,

"Dare me?" one says.

"Here, buy whatever you want, OK?"

"Dare ya," says the other.

Noel watches him push the bottle through the opening. He raises his eyebrows.

The first one lets the bottle drop and they duck behind the metal grate to watch. It just misses a car and shatters onto

"I know, I know," Eddie says.

the pavement.

What he does not know is that Marguerite, unable to call

"Whoooo," the second one yells. "Did you see that!" him back, has chosen to drive to the track and find him. She feels badly about yelling, this being his birthday, and she

"Drop yours now, chicken."

wants to apologize; she also wants him to stop. She knows from evenings past that Noel will insist they stay until The second one stands, holds out his bottle, and chooses the closing—Noel is like that.

And since the track is only ten sparse traffic of the right-hand lane. He wiggles the bottle minutes away, she grabs her handbag and drives their back and forth, trying to time the drop to land between secondhand Nash Rambler down Ocean Parkway. She turns vehicles, as if this was some sort of art and he was some right on Lester Street. The sun is gone and the sky is influx. sort of artist.

Most of the cars are coming from the other direction. She approaches the Lester Street overpass, which used to be His fingers release. He almost smiles.

how customers reached the track, up the stairs, over the street and back down the stairs again, until the track Forty feet below, Marguerite never thinks to look up, never owners paid the city for a traffic light, which left the thinks that anything might be happening on that overpass, overpass, for the most part, deserted.

never thinks about anything besides getting Eddie out of that racetrack while he still has some money left. She is But on this night, it is not deserted. It holds two teenagers wondering what section of the grandstand to look in, even who do not want to be found, two 17-year-olds who, hours as the Old Harper's whiskey bottle smashes her

windshield into a spray of flying glass. Her car veers into the concrete visits with Noel came to a gradual end, each of them unable divider. Her body is tossed like a dol slamming against the to discuss much over breakfast that didn't feel like an effort. door and the dashboard and the steering wheel, lacerating her liver and breaking her arm and thumping her head so An amusement park in California introduced the first hard she loses touch with the sounds of the evening. She tubular steel tracks—they twisted at severe angles does not hear the screeching of cars. She does not hear the unachiev_able with wood—and suddenly, rol er coasters, honking of horns.

She does not hear the retreat of rubberwhich had faded to near oblivion, were back in fashion. Mr. soled sneakers, running down the Lester Street overpass Bul ock, the park owner, had ordered a steel-track model for and off into the night.

Ruby Pier, and Eddie oversaw the construction. He barked at the instal ers, checking their every move. He didn't trust any_thing this fast. Sixty-degree angles? He was sure someone would get hurt.

Anyhow, it gave him a distraction. The Stardust Band Shel was torn down. So was the Zipper ride. And the Tunnel of Love, which kids found too corny now. A few years later, a new boat ride cal ed a log flume LOVE, LIKE RAIN, can nourish from above, drench_ing was constructed, and, to Eddie's surprise, it was hugely couples with a soaking joy. But sometimes, under the angry popular. The riders floated through troughs of water and heat of life, love dries on the surface and must nour_ish dropped, at the end, into a large splash pool. Eddie couldn't from below, tending to its roots, keeping itself alive. figure why people so loved getting wet, when the ocean was 300 yards away. But he maintained it just the same, working The accident on Lester Street sent Marguerite to the shoeless in the water, ensuring that the boats never loosened hospital. She was confined to bed rest for nearly six months. from the tracks.

Her injured liver recovered eventual y, but the expense and the delay cost them the adoption. The child they were In time, husband and wife began talking again, and one ex_pecting went to someone else.

The unspoken blame for night, Eddie even spoke about adopting. Marguerite rubbed this never found a resting place—it simply moved like a her forehead and said, "We're too old now." shadow from husband to wife. Marguerite went quiet for a long time. Eddie lost himself in work. The shadow took a Eddie said, "What's too old to a child?" place at their table and they ate in its presence, amid the

lonely clanking of forks and plates. When they spoke, they The years passed. And while a child never came, their spoke of smal things. The water of their love was hidden wound slowly healed, and their companionship rose to fil beneath the roots. Eddie never bet the horses again. His the space they were saving for another. In the mornings, she made him toast and coffee, and he dropped her at her They would not close. The cutlet slid from her palm. It fel cleaning job then drove back to the pier. Sometimes, in the into the sink. Her arm throbbed. Her breathing quickened. afternoons, she got off early and walked the boardwalk with She stared for a mo_ment at this hand with the locked him, fol owing his rounds, riding carousel horses or yel owfingers that appeared to be_long to someone else, someone painted clamshel s as Eddie explained the rotors and cables gripping a large, invisible jar. Then everything went dizzy. and listened for the engines' hum.

"Eddie?" she cal ed, but by the time he arrived, she had One July evening, they found themselves walking by the passed out on the floor.

ocean, eating grape popsicles, their bare feet sinking in the wet sand. They looked around and realized they were the oldest people on the beach.

Marguerite said something about the bikini bathing suits the IT WAS, THEY would determine, a tumor on the brain, and young girls were wearing and how she would never have her decline would be like many others, treatments that made the nerve to wear such a thing. Eddie said the girls were the disease seem mild, hair fal ing out in patches, mornings lucky, because if she did the men would not look at anyone spent with noisy radiation machines and evenings spent else. And even though by this point Marguerite was in her vomiting in a hospital toilet.

mid-40s and her hips had thickened and a web of smal lines had formed around her eyes, she thanked Eddie In the final days, when cancer was ruled the victor, the grateful y and looked at his crooked nose and wide jaw. The doctors said only, "Rest. Take it easy." When she asked waters of their love fel again from above and soaked them ques_tions, they nodded sympathetical y, as if their nods as surely as the sea that gathered at their feet. were med_icine doled out with a dropper. She realized this was protocol, their way of being nice while being helpless, and when one of them suggested

"getting your affairs in order," she asked to be released from the

hospital. She told more than asked.

THREE YEARS LATER, she was breading chicken cutlets in the kitchen of their apartment, the one they had kept al Eddie helped her up the stairs and hung her coat as she this time, long after Eddie's mother had died, because looked around the apartment. She wanted to cook but he Mar_guerite said it reminded her of when they were kids, made her sit, and he heated some water for tea. He had and she liked to see the old carousel out the window. pur_chased lamb chops the day before, and that night he Suddenly, with_out warning, the fingers of her right hand bum_bled through a dinner with several invited friends and stretched open un_control ably. They moved backward. coworkers, most of whom greeted Marguerite and her sal ow complexion with sentences like, "Wel , look who's back!" the door handle, the rush of outside air, his feet on the as if this were a homecoming and not a farewell party. pavement, the jangle of his keys.

They ate mashed potatoes from a CorningWare dish and He opened her door and helped her get out. Her shoulders had butterscotch brownies for dessert, and when Marguerite were scrunched up near her jaws, like a freezing child. Her finished a second glass of wine, Eddie took the bottle and hair blew across her face. She sniffed and lifted her eyes to poured her a third.

the horizon. She motioned to Eddie and nodded toward the distant top of a big, white amusement ride, with red carts Two days later, she awoke with a scream. He drove her to dangling like tree ornaments.

the hospital in the predawn silence. They spoke in short sentences, what doctor might be on, who Eddie should cal .

"You can see it from here," she said. And even though she was sitting in the seat next to him, Eddie felt her in everything, in the steering wheel, in the gas

"The Ferris wheel?" he said. She looked away. pedal, in the blinking of his eye, in the clearing of his throat. Every move he made was about hanging on to her.

"Home."

She was 47.

"You have the card?" she asked him.

BECAUSE HE HAD not slept in heaven, it was Eddie's

"The card . . ." he said blankly.

perception that he had not spent more than a few hours with any of the people he'd met. Then again, without night or She drew a deep breath and closed her eyes, and her voice day, without sleeping or waking, without sunsets or high was thinner when she resumed speaking, as if that breath tides or meals or schedules, how did he know?

had cost her dearly.

With Marguerite, he wanted only time—more and more

"Insurance," she croaked.

time—and he was granted it, nighttimes and daytimes and nighttimes again. They walked through the doors of the

"Yeah, yeah," he said quickly. "I got the card." as sorted weddings and spoke of everything he wished to speak about. At a Swedish ceremony, Eddie told her about They parked in the lot and Eddie shut the engine. It was his brother, Joe, who had died 10 years earlier from a heart suddenly too stil and too quiet. He heard every tiny sound, at tack, just a month after purchasing a new condominium the squeak of his body on the leather seat, the ca-cunk of in Florida. At a Russian ceremony, she asked if he had kept the old apartment, and he said that he had, and she said she Eddie realized that was precisely what he'd been feeling for was glad. At an outdoor ceremony in a Lebanese vil age, he years.

spoke about what had happened to him here in heaven, and she seemed to listen and know at the same time. He spoke

"I should have worked somewhere else," he told her. "I'm of the Blue Man and his story, why some die when others sorry I never got us out of there. My dad. My leg. I always live, and he spoke about the Captain and his tale of felt like such a bum after the war."

sacri_fice. When he spoke about his father, Marguerite recal ed the many nights he had spent enraged at the man, He saw a sadness pass over her face.

con_founded by his silence. Eddie told her he had made things square, and her eyebrows lifted and her lips spread

"What happened?" she asked. "During that war?" and Ed_die felt an old, warm feeling he had missed for years, the simple act of making his wife happy. He had never quite told her. It was all understood.

Soldiers, in his day, did what they had to do and didn't speak of it once they came home. He thought about the men he'd killed. He thought about the guards. He thought about the blood on his hands. He wondered if he'd ever be forgiven. ONE NIGHT, EDDIE spoke about the changes at Ruby Pier, how the old rides had been torn down, how the

"I lost myself," he said.

pennywhistle music at the arcade was now blaring rock 'n'

roll, how the roller coasters now had corkscrew twists and

"No," his wife said.

carts that hung down from the tracks, how the "dark" rides, which once meant cowboy cutouts in glow paint, were full

"Yes," he whispered, and she said nothing else. of video screens now, like watching television all the time. He told her the new names. No more Dippers or Tumble Bugs. Everything was the Blizzard, the Mindbender, Top Gun, the Vortex.

AT TIMES, THERE in heaven, the two of them would lie down together. But they did not sleep. On earth, Marguerite

"Sounds strange, don't it?" Eddie said. said, when you fell asleep, you sometimes dreamed your heaven and those dreams helped to form it. But there was

"It sounds," she said, wistfully, "like someone else's no reason for such dreams now.

summer."

Instead, Eddie held her shoulders and nuzzled in her hair and took long, deep breaths. At one point, he asked his wife soon."

if God knew he was here. She smiled and said, 'Of course,' even when Eddie admitted that some of his life he'd spent He lowered himself slowly. Her lavender dress was spread hiding from God, and the rest of the time he thought he before him.

went unnoticed.

"You did leave too soon," he said.

"You were angry with me."

"No."

Her eyes flashed.

The Fourth Lesson

"OK. Yes."

FINALLY, AFTER MANY TALKS, Marguerite walked

Eddie through another door. They were back inside the

"There was a reason to it al , " she said. smal , round room. She sat on the stool and placed her fingers to_gether. She turned to the mirror, and Eddie

"What reason?" he said. "How could there be a rea_son?

noticed her re_flection. Hers, but not his.

You died. You were forty-seven. You were the best per_son any of us knew, and you died and you lost everything. And

"The bride waits here," she said, running her hands along I lost everything. I lost the only woman I ever loved." her hair, taking in her image but seeming to drift away.

"This is the moment you think about what you're doing. She took his hands. "No, you didn't. I was right here. And Who you're choosing. Who you wil love. If it's right, you loved me anyway.

Eddie, this can be such a wonderful moment."

"Lost love is stil love, Eddie. It takes a different form, She turned to him.

that's al . You can't see their smile or bring them food or tousle their hair or move them around a dance floor. But

"You had to live without love for many years, didn't you?" when those senses weaken, another heightens. Memory. Memory becomes your

partner. You nurture it. You hold it. Eddie said nothing.

You dance with it.

"You felt that it was snatched away, that I left you too

"Life has to end," she said. "Love doesn't." Eddie thought about the years after he buried his wife. It

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

was like looking over a fence. He was aware of another kind of life out there, even as he knew he would never be a

"Yes."

part of it. "I never wanted anyone else," he said quietly.

"How come you look the way you looked the day I

"I know," she said.

married you?"

"I was still in love with you."

"I thought you'd like it that way."

"I know." She nodded. "I felt it." He thought for a moment. "Can you change it?"

"Here?" he asked.

"Change it?" She looked amused. "To what?"

"Even here," she said, smiling. "That's how strong love

"To the end."

can be."

She lowered her arms. "I wasn't so pretty at the end." She stood and opened a door, and Eddie blinked as he entered behind her. It was a dimly lit room, with foldable Eddie shook his head, as if to say not true.

chairs, and an accordion player sitting in the corner.

"Could you?"

"I was saving this one," she said.

She took a moment, then came again into his arms. The She held out her arms. And for the first time in heaven, he accordion man played the familiar notes. She hummed in initiated his contact, he came to her, ignoring the leg, his ear and they began to move together, slowly, in a ignoring al the ugly associations he had made about dance remembered rhythm that a husband shares only with his and music and weddings, realizing now that they were wife.

real y about loneliness.

You made me love you

"Al that's missing," Marguerite whispered, taking his shoulder, "is the bingo cards."

I didn 't want to do it

He grinned and put a hand behind her waist.

I didn't want to do it....

meshed glass he watched the lobby disappear.

You made me love you

"I can't believe this elevator stil works," Dominguez said. and al the time you knew it

"It must be, like, from the last century." and al the time you knew it....

The man beside him, an estate attorney, nodded slightly, feigning interest. He took off his hat—it was stuffy, and he was sweating—and watched the numbers light up on the brass panel. This was his third appointment of the day. One more, and he could go home to dinner.

When he moved his head back, she was 47 again, the web of lines beside her eyes, the thinner hair, the looser skin

"Eddie didn't have much," Dominguez said. be_neath her chin. She smiled and he smiled, and she was, to him, as beautiful as ever, and he closed his eyes and said

"Um-hmm," the man said, wiping his forehead with a for the first time

what he'd been feeling from the moment he handkerchief. "Then it shouldn't take long." saw her again: "I don't want to go on. I want to stay here." When he opened his eyes, his arms stil held her shape, but The elevator bounced to a stop and the door rumbled open she was gone, and so was everything else.

and they turned toward 6B. The hal way stil had the blackand-white checkered tile of the 1960s, and it smel ed of someone's cooking—garlic and fried potatoes. The superin_tendent had given them the key—along with a deadline, Next Wednesday. Have the place cleared out for a new tenant.

"Wow . . ." Dominguez said, upon opening the door and Friday, 3:15 P.M.

entering the kitchen. "Pretty tidy for an old guy." The sink was clean. The counters were wiped. Lord knows, he thought, his place was never this neat.

"Financial papers?" the man asked. "Bank statements?"

Dominguez pressed the elevator button and the door Jewelry?"

rum_bled closed. An inner porthole lined up with an exterior porthole. The car jerked upward, and through the Dominguez thought of Eddie wearing jewelry and he almost laughed. He realized how much he missed the old man, how drawer, some from a local bank, some from the Vet_erans strange it was not having him at the pier, barking orders, Administration. The attorney fingered through them and, watching everything like a mother hawk. They hadn't even without looking up, said, "That'l do." He pul ed out one cleared out his locker. No one had the heart. They just left bank statement and made a mental note of the balance. his stuff at the shop, where it was, as if he were coming Then, as often happened with these visits, he silently back tomorrow.

con_gratulated himself on his own portfolio of stocks, bonds, and a vested retirement plan. It sure beat ending up

"I dunno. You check in that bedroom thing?" like this poor slob, with little to show but a tidy kitchen.

' The bureau?"

"Yeah. You know, I only been here once myself. I real y only knew Eddie through work."

Dominguez leaned over the table and glanced out the kitchen window. He saw the old carousel. He looked at his The Fifth Person Eddie Meets in Heaven

watch. Speaking of work, he thought to himself. WHITE. THERE WAS ONLY WHITE NOW. NO earth, no

The attorney opened the top drawer of the bedroom bureau. sky, no horizon between the two. Only a pure and silent He pushed aside the pairs of socks, neatly rolled, one inside white, as noiseless as the deepest snowfall at the quietest the other, and the underwear, white boxer shorts, stacked by sunrise.

the waistbands. Tucked beneath them was an old leatherbound box, a serious-looking thing. He flipped it open in White was all Eddie saw. All he heard was his own labored hopes of a quick find. He frowned. Nothing important. No breathing, followed by an echo of that breathing. He inhaled bank statements. No insurance policies. Just a black bow and heard a louder inhale. He exhaled, and it exhaled, too. tie, a Chinese restaurant menu, an old deck of cards, a letter with an army medal, and a faded Polaroid of a man by a Eddie squeezed his eyes shut. Silence is worse when you birthday cake, surrounded by children.

know it won't be broken, and Eddie knew. His wife was gone. He wanted her desperately, one more minute, half a

"Hey," Dominguez called from the other room, "is this minute, five more seconds, but there was no way to reach or what you need?"

cal or wave or even look at her picture. He felt as if he'd tumbled down steps and was crumpled at the bottom. His He emerged with a stack of envelopes taken from a kitchen soul was vacant. He had no impulse. He hung limp and lifeless in the void, as if on a hook, as if all the fluids had sound of a running river—and the whiteness shrank to a sun been gored out of him. He might have hung there a day or a spot reflecting off shimmering waters. Ground appeared month. It might have been a century.

beneath Eddie's feet. His cane touched something solid. He was high up on an embankment, where a breeze blew across Only at the arrival of a small but haunting noise did he stir, his face and a mist brought his skin to a moist glaze. He his eyelids lifting heavily. He had already been to four looked down and saw, in the river, the source of those pockets of heaven, met four people, and while each had haunting

screeches, and he was flushed with the relief of a been mystifying upon arrival, he sensed that this was man who finds, while gripping the basal bat, that there is some_thing altogether different.

no intruder in his house. The sound, this screaming, whistling, thrumming scream, was merely the ca_cophony of The tremor of noise came again, louder now, and Ed_die, in children's voices, thousands of them at play, splashing in a lifelong defense instinct, clenched his fists, only to find the river and shrieking with innocent laughter. his right hand squeezing a cane. His forearms were pocked with liver spots. His fingernails were smal and yel_lowish. Was this what I'd been dreaming? he thought. Al this time?

His bare legs carried the reddish rash—shingles— that had Why? He studied the smal bodies, some jumping, some come during his final weeks on earth. He looked away from wading, some carrying

buckets while others rol ed in the his hastening decay. In human accounting, his body was high grass. He noticed a certain calmness to it al , no roughnear its end. housing, which you usual y saw with kids.

He noticed some_thing else. There were no adults. Not even teenagers. Now came the sound again, a high-pitched rol ing of These were al smal children, with skin the color of dark irregular shrieks and lul s. In life, Eddie had heard this wood, seemingly monitoring themselves.

sound in his nightmares, and he shuddered with the memory: the vil age, the fire, Smitty and this noise, this And then Eddie's eyes were drawn to a white boulder. A squealing cackle that, in the end, emerged from his own slender young girl stood upon it, apart from the others, throat when he tried to speak.

facing his direction. She motioned with both her hands, waving him in. He hesitated. She smiled. She waved again He clenched his teeth, as if that might make it stop, but it and nodded, as if to say, Yes, you.

continued on, like an unheeded alarm, until Eddie yel ed into the choking whiteness: "What is it? What do you Eddie lowered his cane to navigate the downward slope. He want?"

slipped, his bad knee buckling, his legs giving way. But before he hit the earth, he felt a sudden blast of wind at his With that, the high-pitched noise moved to the background, back and he was whipped forward and straightened on his layered atop a second noise, a loose, relentless rumble—the feet, and there he was, standing before the little girl as if he'd been there al the time.

He is 68, a Saturday. He spreads his pills on the counter. The telephone rings, Joe, his brother, is calling from Florida. Joe wishes him happy birthday. Joe talks about his grandson. Joe talks about a condominium. Eddie says "uhhuh" at least 50 times. He is 75, a Monday. He puts on his glasses and checks the maintenance reports. He notices someone missed a shift the Today Is Eddie's Birthday night before and the Squiggly Wiggly Worm Adventure has not been brake-tested. He sighs and takes a placard from He is 51. A Saturday. It is his first birthday without the wall —RIDE CLOSED

TEMPORARILY FOR

Marguerite. He makes Sanka in a paper cup, and eats two MAINTENANCE-then carries it across the boardwalk to the pieces of toast with margarine. In the years after his wife's Wiggly Worm entrance, where he checks the brake panel accident, Eddie shooed away any birthday celebrations, himself.

saying, "Why do I gotta be reminded of that day for?" It was Marguerite who insisted. She made the cake. She He is 82, a Tuesday. A taxi arrives at the park entrance. He invited friends. She always purchased one bag of taffy and slides inside the front seat, pulling his cane in behind him. tied it with a ribbon. "You can't give away your birth_day," she would say.

"Most people like the back," the driver says. Now that she's gone, Eddie tries. At work, he straps himself

"You mind?" Eddie asks.

on a roller coaster curve, high and alone, like a mountain climber. At night, he watches television in the apartment. The driver shrugs. "Nah. I don't mind." Eddie looks straight He goes to bed early. No cake. No guests. It is never hard to ahead. He doesn't say that it feels more like driving this act ordinary if you feel ordinary, and the paleness of way, and he hasn't driven since they refused him a license surrender becomes the color of Eddie's days.

two years ago.

He is 60, a Wednesday. He gets to the shop early. He opens The taxi takes him to the cemetery. He visits his mother's a brown-bag lunch and rips a piece of bologna off a grave and his brother's grave and he stands by his father's sandwich. He attaches it to a hook, then drops the twine grave for only a few moments. As usual, he saves his wife's down the fishing hole. He watches it float. Eventually, it for last. He

leans on the cane and he looks at the headstone disappears, swallowed by the sea.

and he thinks about many things. Taffy. He thinks about taffy. He thinks it would take his teeth out now, but he would eat it anyhow, if it meant eating it with her.

"Saya."

Then came her cloglike shoes—"bakya"—then the iridescent seashells by her feet—"capiz"—then a woven bamboo mat—"banig"—that was laid out before her. She motioned for Eddie to sit on the mat and she sat, too, her legs curled underneath her.

The Last Lesson

None of the other children seemed to notice him. They THE LITTLE GIRL APPEARED TO BE ASIAN, maybe

splashed and rolled and collected stones from the river's five or six years old, with a beautiful cinnamon complexion, floor. Eddie watched one boy rub a stone over the body of hair the color of a dark plum, a small flat nose, full lips that another, down his back, under his arms.

spread joyfully over her gapped teeth, and the most arresting eyes, as black as a seal's hide, with a pinhead of

"Washing," the girl said. "Like our inas used to do." white serving as a pupil. She smiled and flapped her hands excitedly until Eddie edged one step closer, whereupon she

"Inas?" Eddie said.

presented herself.

She studied Eddie's face.

"Tala," she said, offering her name, her palms on her chest.

"Mommies," she said.

"Tala," Eddie repeated.

Eddie had heard many children in his life, but in this one's She smiled as if a game had begun. She pointed to her voice, he detected none of the normal hesitation toward embroidered blouse, loosely slung over

her shoulders and adults. He wondered if she and the other children had wet with the river water.

chosen this riverbank heaven, or if, given their short memories, such a serene landscape had been chosen for

"Baro," she said.

them.

"Baro."

She pointed to Eddie's shirt pocket. He looked down. Pipe cleaners.

She touched the woven red fabric that wrapped around her torso and legs. "Saya."

"These?" he said. He pulled them out and twisted them together, as he had done in his days at the pier. She rose to

"Sundalong?"

her knees to examine the process. His hands shook. ' You see? It's a ...' he finished the last twist ". . . dog." She looked up.

She took it and smiled—a smile Eddie had seen a thousand

"Soldier."

times.

Eddie felt the word like a knife in his tongue. Images

"You like that?" he said.

flashed through his head. Soldiers. Explosions. Morton. Smitty. The Captain. The flamethrowers.

"You burn me," she said.

"Tala . . ." he whispered.

"Tala," she said, smiling at her own name. EDDIE FELT HIS jaw tighten.

"Why are you here, in heaven?"

"What did you say?"

She lowered the animal.

"You burn me. You make me fire."

"You burn me. You make me fire."

Her voice was flat, like a child reciting a lesson. Eddie felt a pounding behind his eyes. His head began to rush. His breathing quickened.

"My ina say to wait inside the nipa. My ina say to hide."

"You were in the Philippines . . . the shadow ... in that hut. . Eddie lowered his voice, his words slow and deliberate.

."

"What. . . were you hiding from, little girl?"

"The nipa. Ina say be safe there. Wait for her. Be safe. Then big noise. Big fire. You burn me." She shrugged her She fingered the pipe-cleaner dog, then dipped it in the narrow shoulders. "Not safe."

water.

Eddie swal owed. His hands trembled. He looked into her

"Sundalong" she said.

deep, black eyes and he tried to smile, as if it were a medicine the little girl needed. She smiled back, but this only made him fal apart. His face col apsed, and he buried

"You wash me," she said. She stepped into the water and it in his palms. His shoulders and lungs gave way. The turned her back to Eddie. Then she pul ed the embroidered dark_ness that had shadowed him al those years was baro over her head.

revealing it_self at last, it was real, flesh and blood, this child, this lovely child, he had kil ed her, burned her to He recoiled. Her skin was horribly burned. Her torso and death, the bad dreams he'd suffered, he'd deserved every narrow shoulders were black and charred and blistered. one. He had seen something! That shadow in the flame!

When she turned around, the beautiful, innocent face was Death by his hand! By his own fiery hand! A flood of tears covered in grotesque scars. Her lips drooped. Only one eye soaked through his fin_gers and

his soul seemed to was open. Her hair was gone in patches of burned scalp, plummet.

covered now by hard, mottled scabs.

He wailed then, and a howl rose within him in a voice he

"You wash me," she said again, holding out the stone. had never heard before, a howl from the very belly of his being, a howl that rumbled the river water and shook the Eddie dragged himself into the river. He took the stone. His misty air of heaven. His body convulsed, and his head fingers trembled.

jerked wildly, until the howling gave way to prayerlike utterances, every word expelled in the breathless surge of

"I don't know how...." he mumbled, barely audible. "I never confession: "I killed you, I KILLED YOU," then a had children...."

whispered "forgive me," then, "FORGIVE ME, OH, GOD

..." and finally, "What have I done ... WHAT HAVE I She raised her charred hand and Eddie gripped it gently and DONE?..." He wept and he wept, until the weeping drained slowly rubbed the stone along her forearm, until the scars him to a shiver. Then he shook silently, swaying back and began to loosen. He rubbed harder; they peeled away. He forth. He was kneeling on a mat before the little dark-haired quickened his efforts until the singed flesh felt and the girl, who played with her pipe-cleaner animal along the healthy flesh was visible. Then he turned the stone over and bank of the flowing river.

rubbed her bony back and tiny shoulders and the nape of her neck and finally her cheeks and her forehead and the skin behind her ears.

She leaned backward into him, resting her head on his AT SOME POINT, when his anguish had quieted, Eddie collapsed, shutting her eyes as if falling into a nap. He felt a tapping on his shoulder. He looked up to see Tala traced gently around the lids. He did the same with her holding out a stone.

drooped lips, and the scabbed patches on her head, until the plum-colored hair emerged from the roots and the face that he had seen at first was before him again.

"Supposed to be there," she said.

When she opened her eyes, their whites flashed out like beacons. "I am five," she whispered.

"Where? At Ruby Pier?"

Eddie lowered the stone and shuddered in short, gasping She nodded.

breaths. "Five . . . uh-huh . . . Five years old? . . ."

"Fixing rides? That was my existence?" He blew a deep She shook her head no. She held up five fingers. Then she breath. "Why?"

pushed them against Eddie's chest, as if to say your five. Your fifth person.

She tilted her head, as if it were obvious.

A warm breeze blew. A tear rolled down Eddie's face. Tala

"Children," she said. "You keep them safe. You make good studied it the way a child studies a bug in the grass. Then for me."

she spoke to the space between them.

She wiggled the dog against his shirt.

"Why sad?" she said.

"Is where you were supposed to be," she said, and then she

"Why am I sad?" he whispered. "Here?" touched his shirt patch with a small laugh and added two words, "Eddie Main-ten-ance."

She pointed down. "There."

Eddie sobbed, a final vacant sob, as if his chest were empty. He had surrendered all barriers; there was no grown-up-to-child talk anymore. He said what he always said, to EDDIE SLUMPED IN the rushing water. The stones of his Marguerite, to Ruby, to the Captain, to the Blue Man, and, stories were all around him now, beneath the surface, one more than anyone, to himself.

touching another. He could feel his form melting, dissolving, and he sensed that he did not have long, that

"I was sad because I didn't do anything with my life. I was whatever came after the five people you meet in heaven, it nothing. I

accomplished nothing. I was lost. I felt like I was upon him now.

wasn't supposed to be there."

"Tala?" he whispered.

Tala plucked the pipe-cleaner dog from the water. She looked up.

WITH THAT, THE river rose quickly, engulfing Eddie's

"The little girl at the pier? Do you know about her?" waist and chest and shoulders. Before he could take another breath, the noise of the children disappeared above him, and Tala stared at her fingertips.

She nodded yes. he was submerged in a strong but silent current. His grip was stil entwined with Tala's, but he felt his body being

"Did I save her? Did I pul her out of the way?" washed from his soul, meat from the bone, and with it went al the pain and weariness he ever held inside him, every Tala shook her head. "No pul ."

scar, every wound, every bad memory.

Eddie shivered. His head dropped. So there it was. The end He was nothing now, a leaf in the water, and she pul ed him of his story.

gently, through shadow and light, through shades of blue and ivory and lemon and black, and he realized al these

"Push," Tala said.

colors, al along, were the emotions of his life. She drew him up through the breaking waves of a great gray ocean He looked up. "Push?"

and he emerged in bril iant light above an almost unimaginable scene:

"Push her legs. No pul . You push. Big thing fal . You keep her safe."

There was a pier fil ed with thousands of people, men and women, fathers and mothers and children—so many Eddie shut his eyes in denial. "But I felt her hands," he children—children from the past and the present, children said. "It's the only thing I remember. I couldn't have pushed who had not yet been born, side by side, hand in hand, in her. I felt her hands."

caps, in short pants, fil ing the boardwalk and the rides and the

wooden platforms, sitting on each other's shoulders, Tala smiled and scooped up river water, then placed her sitting in each other's laps.

They were there, or would be small wet fingers in Eddie's adult grip. He knew right away there, because of the simple, mundane things Eddie had they had been there before.

done in his life, the accidents he had prevented, the rides he had kept safe, the unnoticed turns he had affected every

"Not her hands," she said. "My hands. I bring you to day. And while their lips did not move, Eddie heard their heaven. Keep you safe."

voices, more voices than he could have imagined, and a peace came upon him that he had never known before. He was free of Tala's grasp now, and he floated up above the sand and above the

voices, more voices than he could have imagined, and a peace came upon him that he had never known before. He was free of Tala's grasp now, and he floated up above the sand and above the

boardwalk, above the tent tops and spires of the midway toward the peak of the big, white Ferris Eddie's few possessions in a trunk at the maintenance shop, wheel, where a cart, gently swaying, held a woman in a alongside memorabilia from Ruby Pier, including photos of yellow dress—his wife, Marguerite, waiting with her arms the original entrance.

extended. He reached for her and he saw her smile and the voices melded into a single word from God:

Nicky, the young man whose key had cut the cable, made a new key when he got home, then sold his car four months later. He returned often to Ruby Pier, where he bragged to his friends that his great-grandmother was the woman for whom it was named.

Home.

Seasons came and seasons went. And when school let out and the days grew long, the crowds returned to the amusement park by the great gray ocean—not as large as those at the theme parks, but

large enough. Come summer, the spirit turns, and the seashore beckons with a song of the waves, and people gather for carousels and Ferris wheels and sweet iced drinks and cotton candy.

Epilogue

Lines formed at Ruby Pier—just as a line formed

THE PARK AT RUBY PIER REOPENED THREE days

someplace else: five people waiting, in five chosen after the accident. The story of Eddie's death was in the memories, for a little girl named Amy or Annie to grow and newspapers for a week, and then other stories about other to love and to age and to die, and to finally have her deaths took its place.

question answered—why she lived and what she lived for. And in that line now was a whiskered old man, with a linen The ride called Freddy's Free Fall was closed for the season, cap and a crooked nose, who waited in a place called the but the next year it reopened with a new name, Daredevil Stardust Band Shell to share his part of the secret of heaven: Drop. Teenagers saw it as a badge of courage, and it drew that each affects the other and the other affects the next, and many customers, and the owners were pleased.

the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one. Eddie's apartment, the one he had grown up in, was rented to someone new, who put leaded glass in the kitchen window, obscuring the view of the old carousel. Dominguez, who had agreed to take over Eddie's job, put The author wishes to thank Vinnie Curci, of Amusements of America, and Dana Wyatt, director of operations for Pacific Park on the Santa Monica Pier. Their assistance in researching this book was invaluable, and their pride in protecting fun park customers is laudable. Also, thanks to Dr. David Colson, of Henry Ford Hospital, for the information on war wounds. And Kerri Alexander, who handles, well, everything. My deepest appreciation to Bob Miller, Ellen Archer, Wil Schwalbe, Leslie Wells, Jane Comins, Katie Long, Michael Burkin, and Phil Rose for their inspiring belief in me; to David Black, for what agent-author relationships should be; to Janine, who patiently heard this book read aloud, many times; to Rhoda, Ira, Cara, and Peter, with whom I shared my first Ferris wheel; and to my uncle, the real Eddie, who told me his stories long before I told my own.

THE END